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Science Fantasy

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of Publication

Captain Sindbad

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's
spectacular fantasy
based on
"The Arabian Nights"

Starring

GUY WILLIAMS
HEIDI BRUEHL
PEDRO ARMENDARIZ
ABRAHAM SOFAER

See Inside Cover

Also Fiction by :
MICHAEL MOORCOCK
K. W. BENNETT
STEVE HALL

*Anna Luise Schubert and John
Schapar perform their startling
SPIDER DANCE in
"Captain Sindbad."*



Captain Sindbad

A King Brothers production for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

One of the most spectacular fantasy films yet produced will be screened in London in time for Easter, probably at the Coliseum, St. Martin's Lane, commencing April 11th, although the world premiere will already have been held in Munich, where director Byron Haskin handled a cast of thousands in making this fascinating movie.

Based on the legendary hero of "The Arabian Nights," a classic in its own right, Byron Haskin brings to life the incomparable swashbuckling Sindbad (played by Guy Williams) in his attempts to rescue the beautiful princess (Heidi Breuhl) from the machinations of the arch-villain, El Kerim, who attempts to turn her mythical Oriental kingdom into a dictatorship.

Against this scintillating background, crammed with magic and splendour, Sindbad fights the giant, invisible monster in the great arena scene, recaptures the princess and takes her through the meshes of a giant spider web (one of the highlights of which is the fabulous spider-dance) battling 'enemy aliens' on the way and a variety of other spine-tingling adventures.

The film brings to the screen the celebrated German recording star, 20-year-old Heidi Breuhl, who already has several songs in the million-sale category, her recording of "Ring Of Gold" having topped one and a half million. A resident of Munich, she had gone to America on a concert tour, and returned home to be offered the feminine lead in "Captain Sindbad," a coincidence which will probably lead her on to stardom.

Regular readers of fantasy and adventure stories will undoubtedly love this outstanding film.

Science Fantasy

Vol. 20 No. 58

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CONTENTS

● Long Novelettes

- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------|----|
| THE GREATER CONQUEROR | Michael Moorcock | 2 |
| THE SEVENTEENTH SUMMER | K. W. Bennett | 43 |

● Short Stories

- | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------|-----|
| HOLE IN THE DYKE | Steve Hall | 90 |
| THE MIND OF YOUNG CRADLE | Hugh Christopher | 101 |

● Book Reviews

John Carnell 111

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Just how 'great' was Alexander? Considering his ultimate destiny, were there other agencies at work using him as a springboard for a vaster design?

THE GREATER CONQUEROR

BY MICHAEL MOORCOCK

o n e

He felt he was much more than one man. Not one god, even, but many . . . There seemed to be a hundred other entities writhing within him. Writhing to release themselves. Every limb, every projection of bone seemed to be part of another being.

He lay on the fur-strewn bed, sweating, dominated by movements in his mind and body which he was incapable of controlling. Alexander the Great groaned in torment.

The buxom Corinthian woman spat into the rushes on the floor of the tavern.

"That for the God-King!"

But the silence around her put a stop to her enlarging the theme. The Thracian known as Simon of Byzantium lifted his bronze cup, the sleeve of his silk-trimmed jerkin falling back down his brown arm, and sucked sweet Persian wine into his throat. He sensed the discomfort the other roisterers felt towards the woman and, because he could be cautious, dropped his arm from her thick waist and pushed her from him.

He looked down his long nose. His scarred face moved and he smiled as he addressed an old Persian soldier.

"You say you were in the army Darius led against Alexander?"

"That's right—a charioteer. His cavalry ran rings round us."

"What did *you* think of him?"

"Alexander? I don't know. I was quite close to him at one stage and saw a spearman get a blow at him—struck him in the thigh. He yelled—not in pain but when he saw his own blood flowing. He couldn't believe it. For a short time he was an open target as he stared down at his thigh, dabbing at the blood with his finger and inspecting it. Then he shouted something—I didn't recognise the language—and was in command of himself again. They said the wound healed unnaturally quickly."

"He claims to be the son of Zeus," the Corinthian woman said from the shadows, "but many Persians say he's evil Ahriman's spawn."

Simon pursed his lips and fingered his wine cup. "Perhaps he's just a mortal," he suggested, "a mortal of unusual vitality?"

"Perhaps," the Persian soldier said. "I only know he's conquered the world."

"I heard he halted his Indian campaign at the River Indus—why should he do that?" Simon said.

"His Macedonians say they forced him to stop, but I cannot believe that. Even Alexander must tire—that's my theory. I think he needed to rest and recuperate. Throughout his campaigns he's hardly slept, must move on continually as if driven to conquer. Who knows what spurred him to conquest—or what made him put a temporary halt to his victories?"

"The Indians have an ancient and mighty religion of which we know little," said a middle-aged and scrawny trader from Carthage. "Could their Gods be stronger than ours? Stronger than Alexander?" He pulled at his grey-streaked beard. His many rings glinted in the ill-lit place.

"Such talk is heresy these days," cautioned the Persian, but it could be seen that he was contemplating this idea.

"People talk of nothing but the Macedonian," said the swarthy trader. "From the Bosphorus to the Nile they curse

or praise him. But what is he other than a man who has been lucky? Events have shaped him, not he them. He owes much to his foresighted father King Philip, and that warped mother Queen Olympias, both of whom, in their separate ways, prepared the world for his conquests. What reason for instance did he have for his meanderings in Persia some years ago? Why, instead of pressing on, did he embark on a wild goose chase after Darius? He had no reason save that events were not ready for him."

"I like to think this of great men, also," Simon smiled, "but I would join his army for my own convenience."

"So that's why you're in Babylon. I wondered about you, my friend. Where are you from?" The Carthaginian poured himself more wine from a skin.

"I was born in Thrace, but I'm Byzantine by adoption. I've spent seven years there as Captain of Infantry. But now I've the urge to see the East and since Alexander goes east, decided to attach myself to his army. I hear he's in Babylon now?"

"That's true. But you might find him hard to meet—obviously he is not personally concerned with the hiring of mercenaries." The Persian's tone was friendly.

"I've heard this man—or God—spoken of so often that I've a mind to meet him if that's possible."

"Good luck to you, friend. He'll either kill you or promote you. He's a man of extremes."

"Are not all great conquerors?"

"You're marvellous learned for a mercenary," the Carthaginian grinned.

Simon picked up his scabbarded short-sword from the bench.

"And you're marvellous curious, friend. Know you not that all Arts are encouraged in Byzantium, just as they were in ancient Greece—including the Arts of Reading and Philosophy."

The Persian laughed. "That's the story Byzantium tells. I for one do not believe that any city could be so enlightened. All you Westerners yearn for a Greece that never was—your whole philosophy is based on a need for perfection; a perfection you can never attain because it never existed. Believe me, the gutters of Byzantium still stink!"

"Not so strongly as Persian jealousy," Simon said, and left before he was called upon to take the argument to its conclusion.

But behind him in the tavern the Persian had not been angered. Instead he was laughing, wiping his mouth with his arm stump.

Simon heard the laughter as he crossed the dim Square of the Bazaar, almost deserted of merchants and customers. The sun was still setting. It was nearly curfew. A few merchants baling their goods looked up as he strode, a tall, gaunt, fighting man, in smooth old leather, towards the Street of the Bronze-workers where he had a friend.

Around him, golden Babylon squatted like an ancient monster, containing all knowledge, all secrets, her stepped houses, palaces and temples soaking the last of the sun into their burnished hides. He walked up the steeply rising street and came at length to a small white house without windows. He knocked.

For a while he waited patiently as darkness came. Eventually bolts were withdrawn on the other side of the door and it was opened. An eye gleamed. The door opened wider.

Wizened Hano smiled welcomingly. "Come in, Simon. So you reached our splendid Babylon!"

Simon stepped into the house. It was very dark, over-hot, with the unpleasantly bitter smell of metal. The old Phoenician clutched at his arm and led him down the dark passage.

"Will you be staying in Babylon, my boy?" Hano said, and then, before Simon could answer this question: "How's the sword?"

"I intend to see Alexander," Simon said, disliking the old man's touch though he liked Hano greatly. "And the sword is excellent, has kept its edge in a dozen fights—I intend to hire it to Alexander."

Hano's grip tightened as they entered a dark, smoky room, a red brazier gleaming in its centre. Around the smoke-stained walls were weapons—swords, shields, lances—and several couches and small tables were scattered on the floor. The smoke caught in Simon's lungs and he coughed it out. Hano pointed to a couch. "Sit down, Simon." He shuffled towards his own couch on the other side of the brazier, stretched himself at full length and scratched his hooked nose.

"Alexander has many swords."

"I know—but if you granted me a favour it might facilitate my meeting him."

"I owe you friendship and more," Hano said, "for you saved me from an unpleasant death that time in Thebes nine years ago. But though I sense what you want of me I am reluctant to agree to it."

"Why?"

"An old man's caution, maybe, but the stories I've been hearing of late have been disquieting. Alexander claims himself son of Zeus, Jupiter Ammon. Others say that the Persian evil one Ahriman possesses him. All or none of this may be true—but every oracle from here to Pela is prophesying turmoil and trouble for the world and the king who rules it. Perhaps you would be wiser to join some ordinary caravan travelling east?" Hano pulled back his woollen robe, revealing a pale and unlovely leg. He poised his wrinkled hand and then almost hurled it at a spot on his leg and began to scratch at the place with his talons of nails.

"I'm sick of this prattle of gods and demons. Can no one be content simply to believe in men and what men could be if they ceased blaming their misfortunes on unseen gods rather than on their own ineffectiveness? Life's not easy, it is a hard task to live it well and with grace—but, by Hades, let's not complicate it with deities and water-nymphs!"

Simon spat into the brazier which flared and spluttered.

Hano scratched at his thigh, drawing back more of his robe to do so, revealing a greater expanse of unhealthy flesh.

"I have seen supernatural manifestations of evil, my boy."

"You have seen what a muddled brain wished you to see."

"What matter? Now, let's end this conversation before you yell more heresies and have us both arrested."

"Heresy and treason combined if Alexander's chest-puffing claim be true." Simon looked away from the old man's thin legs and stared into the brazier.

Hano changed the subject.

"In Utopia," he said to Simon, "you'd yet be seeking further perfection. You call yourself a realist, Simon—perfection is not a reality."

"Realities can be created," said Simon.

"True," Hano agreed. "But by the same logic, realities can be made unreal—unrealities made real. What if there *were* supernatural beings. How would you fit them into your theory?"

"The situation will never arise."

"Let us hope so."

The Phoenician turned his old twisted face towards Simon. The brazier light stained it a reddish brown, showing the wrinkles of mingled cynicism, fatalism and good nature. Hano said at length: "Very well."

He got up and moved about the crowded room taking a pot from one shelf, a skin of wine from another.

Soon the smell of herbs came from the pot on the brazier as Hano brewed wine for his guest.

"You'll help" Simon said.

"Alexander owes me a favour. But he has strange ways of repaying debts and I'd not normally be foolish enough to remind him of this one."

"What did you do for him?"

"Set the handle of a star-metal blade with black opals."

"That was a favour!" Simon laughed.

Hano scowled, but genially. "Know you not what that meant? It meant he could not directly handle iron or anything likely to conduct its force to his body. Black opal is one of the few gems which will serve to negate the flow."

"So?"

"So Alexander has a weakness. Iron will harm him."

"If I had such a secret I would kill the man who held it" Simon said reflectively.

"Not if you were Alexander and the man was dear to Olympias."

"You know Queen Olympias!"

"Olympias wishes me kept alive so I can feed her with secrets."

"Dark secrets, I'll warrant, if the stories of her are half-true."

"They do not touch the real truth about her."

"Does she really sport with snakes at these rites?"

"Aye—and black goats are present too."

Simon swore.

Hano handed him a cup of hot wine. As he drank he said: "I'm impatient to meet the God-King—how will you help?"

"I'll give you a letter and a token to take to Alexander. But be wary, my boy. Be wary."

two

Though he rarely admitted it, the idea of a supernatural world of gods and spirits disturbed Simon. Had it been practicable he might have become a militant atheist but instead he kept his opinions secret for the most part and did his utmost not to question them or even think of them.

When he reached the great golden palace of Alexander he paused and stared up at it with admiration. It was illuminated by hundreds of torches many of which, on long poles, surrounded the palace. Others flared on its many ramparts.

Two guards came forward. They were Babylonians in high helmets with oiled hair and beards. Their javelins threatened him.

In poor Babylonian Simon said:

"I come to see King Alexander—I have a token and a letter for him."

They treated him with some respect, though they divested him of his sword and led him to the main gate where, after conversation he was admitted.

He was made to wait several times, being studied and questioned by a variety of viziers and minions of the king, but at last he was ushered into a large chamber.

Big windows let in the flickering torchlight. A great bed of brass, silver and gold, heaped with silks and furs, was in the centre of the room.

Alexander was sitting up in bed. He had been sweating, Simon could see. His nose told him the same story.

The odour, in fact, was bad. Far worse than ordinary perspiration. Simon couldn't place the smell.

With a degree of nervousness Simon approached the huge bed.

Suddenly, King Alexander grinned and stuck out a handsome hand.

"You have a letter for me, I hear—and a token?"

"I have, sire." Simon gave the letter and the little talisman to Alexander, studying the king's strange face. In a way it was boyish, in another ancient and sensuous. He had a long nose and thick lips, heavily-lidded eyes and brown, curly hair. Simon was taken aback by the king's lack of ceremony, by his friendly grin. Was this the God-King? The spawn of evil?

Alexander read the letter quickly, nodding to himself.

"Did Hano tell you of my debt to him?"

"No, sire," Simon said tactfully.

"He has many secrets, Hano—but he's an old man and, in his generosity, keeps few to himself I've heard."

"He seems curiously tight-lipped, sire," Simon replied, anxious for his friend's life, "and even I who saved his life one time in Thebes can never get a full reply to any question I ask him."

Alexander looked up sharply, staring Simon in the face with peculiarly wide eyes.

"So you wish to join my army. Hano recommends you as a fighting man—suggests you join my staff. I choose my officers with care, Simon of Byzantium."

"I wish only a trial, sire."

"You shall have it."

Alexander studied the letter again.

"You're from Byzantium, I note. My father Philip was repulsed by that city some years ago—but that does not mean I can have no love for the city—perhaps the contrary. It's well-known I disliked him and can admire a city which withstood his attack." Alexander smiled again, "Though she did not hold out for long against Philip's son, did she?"

"No, sire."

Alexander had an almost tangible vitality, but he was evidently unwell. This ailment was not solely confined to his body, either, Simon felt.

Alexander mused, caressing the little amulet.

"I have need of a herald—a man who can travel between wherever I am campaigning and the capital of Macedonia."

"I thought Persia was your base these days, sire."

"You've been listening to Greek and Macedonian criticism, no doubt. They say I've forsaken my own lands for the flesh-pots and honours of the east. That's a lie. It is too far to travel back always to Pela. Persia offers a better base for my operations. There are still a few acres of the world left for me to conquer, Simon—and they all lie Eastwards."

Alexander sank back into his silks, eyeing the Thracian.

"You'll serve my mother and myself as a messenger."

Simon put his hand to his lips and said courteously: "I had rather hoped to go with the army, sire."

Alexander frowned slightly. "And so you will, of course. No doubt there'll be fighting for you—and new knowledge. I'm pleased that you're literate. Most of my captains are chosen for several qualities—courage, loyalty—and learning. You appear to have courage and learning—but I must find out about your loyalty, you understand."

Simon nodded. "That is logical, sire."

"Good, then—" Alexander broke off as the doors of the chamber opened behind Simon. The Thracian turned to stare at the door.

A vizier, in long cloth-of-gold robes, hurried into the room. He prostrated himself before the king's bed.

"Son of Zeus," he mumbled, "a message."

"Is it secret?"

"No, sire—they say it is already common knowledge."

"Then speak—what is it?" Alexander propped himself into a sitting position again.

"A massacre, sire—in Lonarten—a troop of your Macedonian horse went berserk, killed many hundreds of women and children. There are rumours of cannibalism and unhealthy rites . . ." the vizier stopped as a smile crossed Alexander's sensuous lips. "The people are asking for your interference—for compensation."

Alexander smiled again. Simon was sickened by the sight. The king could be seen to grip hold of the bed-clothes as if attempting to control himself. He groaned once, slightly.

With effort he said: "We must call a halt to—we must stop . . ." Then he flung back his handsome head and bellowed with laughter. It was a laughter totally evil, a horrible, malicious joy which seethed around the room, echoing and roaring in Simon's horrified ears.

"Seize the complainers," Alexander shouted, "we'll sell them as eunuchs to the harems of Turkey. Teach them that the ways of a god are not the ways of a mere king—teach them not to question the word or actions of the Son of Zeus!"

Hurriedly, the vizier backed out of the room.

Simon, forgetful for his own safety, leaned forward and shouted into Alexander's twisted face:

"You are mad—for your own sake do not let this massacre continue. Your unruly troops will cause a revolution—you will lose your empire."

Alexander's eyes opened even wider. A hand leapt from the silks and furs and seized Simon's ear. The mouth curled and even teeth moved as Alexander's snarled:

"For you I will *invent* a death !"

Simon grasped the wrist attempting to wrest himself from Alexander's grip. He was sickened, trembling and shaken by the strength in one so evidently ill. He felt the presence of something more than common insanity. What had changed the pleasant, practical soldier into this manifestation of evil ? How could such different qualities exist in one body ? Terror clouded his mind.

With a wrench he was free of the king's grasp and backed panting away from him.

"They said you were Ahriman's spawn—and I did not believe them," he gasped.

Alexander grimaced, flung back the bed-clothes and leapt to the ground, advancing towards Simon, hands outstretched.

"I am Zeus's son—born of god and mortal to rule the world. Abase yourself, heretic, for I have the power to send you to Hades !"

"All men have that power," Simon said, turned and ran for the great doors, tugged them open and, before he could be stopped fled down the shouting corridors, blind to everything but the need to escape from the screaming madman behind him.

He remembered little of the flight, of the two fights, in the first of which he somehow gained a weapon, of his breathless running through the streets of Babylon with hordes of soldiers seeking him out.

He ran.

He had run himself virtually to death when several warriors pinned him in a blind alley and he turned, snarling like an animal to defend himself. Crouching, sword raised, he waited for them as they cautiously advanced.

They had not expected such ferocity. He had cut the first soldier down in a trice and sliced the flesh from another's arm.

In front of him, as if superimposed on the real scene before him, was the great, sensuous head of Alexander still roaring with crazy laughter.

Simon had seen madmen many times. But Alexander had more than madness. He slashed with his sword and missed his target, fell forward, rolled on his back, brought his sword

across his face to deflect a blade which had hurtled down through the confused night. He edged back, flung himself sideways, slashing, scrambled up and brought the edge of his sword up to chop a man's jugular.

Then he was running again, every limb aching, but a terrible fear, a fear of more than death or torture, driving, driving him onward to escape.

When the silent, dark-robed men appeared out of the night and surrounded them he cut at one but his sword seemed to meet metal, his hand went numb and the blade fell to the stones of the streets.

Alexander's face rose before him, laughing, laughing. The roaring, evil merriment filled his head, then his whole body until it seemed that he, Simon, was Alexander, that he was enjoying the bloody joke, the evil, malignant glee pouring wildly from his shaking body.

Then peace of a kind and hazy, mysterious dreams where he saw strange shapes moving through the smoke from a million red and glowing braziers.

Simon felt a hard, smooth surface beneath his back.

He opened his eyes warily.

A lean, white, thin-lipped face looked kindly down at him.

"I am Abaris," he said.

"Simon of Byzantium," said the Thracian.

"You have witnessed darkness?" It was only half a question.

"Yes," Simon replied, bemused.

"We are men of light. The Magi welcome you. You are safe here."

"Magi? They are priests in Persia—but you're no Persian."

"That is so."

"Abaris? There is an Abaris of legend—a wizard, was he not—a priest of Apollo who rode on an arrow?"

The Magi made no reply to this, simply smiled.

"You have incurred the wrath of Alexander. How long would you say you had to live?"

"A strange question. I'd say as long as my wits were sharp enough to evade the searchings of his soldiers."

"You would be wrong."

Simon pushed himself upright on the wide bench and looked around him. Two other priests sat regarding him from across the bare room. Daylight filtered in from a hole in the ceiling.

"Do I really owe you my life?"

"We think you do—but you are in no debt. We wish we could give such concrete aid to all enemies of Alexander."

"I am not his enemy—he is mine."

"You have witnessed what he is—can you still say that?"

Simon nodded. "I am his enemy," he agreed and then amended this with: "Or at least the enemy of what he represents."

"You are exact—we, also, are the enemies of what Alexander represents."

Simon put his head on one side and smiled slightly. "Ah—let us be careful. He is insane, that is all. He represents material evil, not supernatural."

Briefly, Abaris looked impatiently away, frowning. Then his features resumed their earlier look.

"It is a bold thing to be an unbeliever in these times."

"Bold or not—it is what I am." Simon swung his legs off the bench. He felt incredibly weak.

Abaris said: "We Magi worship Ormuzd. Simply—Alexander represents Ahriman."

"These are the twin facets of your single deity are they not?" Simon said. He nodded. "I know a little about your cult—it's cleaner than most. You worship Fire, Sun and Light—with a minimum of ritual."

"True. A man who is confident in his soul needs little ritual."

Simon was satisfied by this.

"We would be grateful if you would ally yourself with us, the Magi," Abaris said quietly. "In return we will protect you from Alexander's minions as best we can."

"I told you—and I do not wish to seem ungrateful—my wits will keep me safe from the Macedonian's warriors."

"We refer to his supernatural minions."

Simon shook his head. "I respect your beliefs—but I cannot accept them personally."

Abaris leaned forward and said urgently, softly:

"Simon, you must aid us. Alexander and his mother are both possessed. For years we have been aware of this. For years we have attempted to fight the forces possessing them—and we are losing. You have seen how Ahriman controls Alexander. You must aid us!"

Simon said: "You have cloaked the simple fact of Alexander's madness in a shroud of supernatural speculation."

Abaris shook his head, saying nothing. Simon continued:

"I have seen many men go mad with riches and power—Alexander is another. When he dies his good works will survive but the evil will be eliminated by time."

"You are naive, young man. Why, Achilles believed that . . ." Abaris bit his lip and lapsed into silence.

"Achilles? He died a thousand years ago. How do you know what he believed?"

Abaris turned away. "Of course, I could not know," he said. His eyes were hooded.

"You give me cause to think you really are the Abaris of legend," Simon smiled. He was joking. But even to his ears the joke rang true.

Abaris said: "Can a man live for more than a thousand years?"

"No," Simon said, "no." He said it almost savagely, for it was what he wished to believe.

Out there, in a palace of Babylon, there was *evil*, he thought. But it was not, could not be—*must* not be supernatural.

Abaris now said:

"Alexander has reigned almost thirteen years—a mystic number. Our oracles prophesied that the turning point would come after thirteen years of rule. Now, as we fear, Alexander and the forces which act through him will bring an unchecked reign of evil to the world—or else, and the chance is small, he will be stopped."

"You wish me to aid you in this. I must dissent. To help you I would have to believe you—that I cannot do."

Abaris seemed to accept this. When he next spoke it was in a detached, trancelike voice.

"Ahriman—the multiplicity of Ahrimans whom we designate by the one name—selected Olympias many years ago. He needed a vessel through which to work and, at that time, no mortal had been born who would serve Ahriman's purpose. So he took possession of poor Olympias. Philip, that great and wronged man, went regularly to the Isle of Samothrace on pilgrimage and, one year, Olympias made it her business to be there also. A love-potion was all she needed. Philip was enamoured of her. They had a son—Alexander . . ."

Simon said wearily: "This is mere gossip such as old women make in the markets."

"Ormuzd protect you if you ever learn the truth," was all Abaris said.

Simon rose shakily. "If there is anything I can do to repay you—some material act, perhaps—I am very willing."

Abaris thought for a moment. Then he took a scroll from his robe. He unrolled it and glanced over the weird script. It was not Persian, Simon knew, but what it was he could not tell.

Abaris handed the scroll to Simon. "We'll furnish you with a horse and a disguise. Will you go to Pela for us? Will you deliver a message to our brothers?"

"Willingly," Simon said, though he was aware that to journey to the capital of Macedonia would be courting danger.

"They live in secret," Abaris told Simon, "but we will tell you how to find them. Also we will furnish you with weapons, a horse and a disguise of some sort."

"I'd be grateful for that," Simon smiled.

"We'll give you a day for resting and allowing the herbs we'll give you a drink to do their work—then you can start off. You should have little trouble here, for our magic will protect you and we know a secret way out of the city."

Simon lay back on the bench. "Healing herbs will be very welcome," he said, "and something to help me take a dreamless sleep . . ."

t h r e e

Outside, the courtiers glanced at one another, not daring to enter the room where a man groaned.

A short, clever-looking man in ornate war-gear turned to a calm-faced, sensitive man.

"Why was he so anxious to apprehend the Thracian, I wonder, Anaxarchus?"

The sensitive man shook his head. "I have no idea. I hear he was from my home city, Abdera, before he went to Byzantium. For all people say that the folk of Abdera are stupid, some very clever men were born there."

"And you, of course, are one," the soldier smiled ironically.

"I must be—I am philosopher attached to Alexander's train," Anaxarchus said.

The warrior took several nervous paces up the corridor, wheeled around, cursing. "By the Salamander's breath, are we never to finish our conquests? What is wrong with Alexander, Anaxarchus? How long has he been like this? Rumours came to Egypt, but I discounted them."

"He is ill, Ptolemy, that is all," Anaxarchus said, but he did not believe his own words.

"That is *all*! Even if I had not heard the Oracle of Libya speak of terrible strifings in this world and the others I would be troubled. Things are happening, Anaxarchus—doom-clouds are covering the world."

"Gloomy, Ptolemy—he is only sick. He has a fever."

Another awful groan came from behind the doors, a terrified and terrible groan of awful agony. Neither did it seem to represent physical pain but some deeper agony of spirit.

"An unusual fever," Ptolemy said savagely. He strode towards the doors, but Anaxarchus blocked his passage.

"No, Ptolemy—you would not emerge with your sanity intact, I warn you."

Ptolemy looked at the scholar for a moment, then turned and almost ran down the corridor.

Inside the locked room, the man—or god—groaned terribly. It was as if the bones of his face were breaking apart to form individual beings. What was he? Even he could not be sure. For years he had been certain of his own power, confident that his greatness was his own. But now, it was obvious to him, poor, tormented Alexander, that he was nothing—nothing but a vessel, an agent through which many forces worked—and even those forces were united under a common name. He knew then, also that they had entered many others in the past that, if his strength broke, they would enter many more until their work was done.

Part of him begged for death.

Part of him attempted to fight that which was in him.

Part of him planned—crime.

Simon cloaked and armed, clamped his knees against his steed's back and galloped over the sparsely-covered plains of Babylon, the folds of his cloak flying behind him like the wings of a diving bat.

The horse snorted, its sturdy legs flashing, its eyes big and its heart pounding.

For two hours, Simon had ridden in safety.

But now the cold night air above him was alive with dreadful sounds.

He drew his sword from its scabbard and rode on, telling himself that the noises were the flapping wings of vultures.

Then a shape came swooping in front of him. He caught a glimpse of a pale, human face. But it was not entirely human. Snakes twined on its head, blood dripped from its eyes. The horse came to a sudden halt, reared whinnying.

Simon closed his eyes against the sight.

"The herbs the Magi gave me have induced visions," he told himself aloud in shaking tones.

But he could not believe it. He had seen them.

The Eumenides—the Furies of legend!

For the face had been that of a woman.

Now the sounds came closer, ominous. Simon urged the frightened horse onwards. Sharp female faces with serpents in place of hair, blood streaming from malevolent eyes, hands like talons, swooped and cackled about him. It was nightmare.

Then, quite suddenly, there came a dull booming sound from the distance, like the far away sound of surf. Nearer and nearer it came until the night opened to brightness, a strange golden light which seemed to break through the blackness, splintering it into fragments. The winged creatures were caught in the glare, wheeled about uncertainly, shrieking and keening.

They were gone.

The light faded.

Simon rode on. And still he insisted to himself that what he had witnessed was hallucination. Something done to his weary brain by the potion the Magi had given him.

The rest of the night was full of nauseous sound, glimpses of things which flew or wriggled. But, convinced that he dreamed, horrified yet keeping close hold of sanity, Simon pushed the steed onwards towards Pela.

Horse and man rested for only a few hours at a time. The journey took days until, at length, eyes sunken in his head from tiredness, face grey and gaunt and mind numb he arrived at the Macedonian capital and sought out the Magi in the clay-built slums of the city.

Massiva, head of the secret order in Pela, was a tall, handsome Numidian. He greeted Simon warmly.

"We were informed of your coming and did our best, when you came close enough, to ward off the dangers which Alexander's minions sent against you."

Simon did not reply to this. Silently, he handed over the scroll.

Massiva opened it, read it, frowning.

"This we did not know," he said, "Olympias has sent aid to Alexander in Babylon."

The priest offered no explanation, so Simon did not ask for one.

Massiva shook his head wearily. "I do not understand how one human can endure so much," he said, "but then she has other aid than human . . ."

"What are these stories about her?" Simon asked, thinking that he might at last find some truth where before he had heard nothing but rumour and hints.

"The simple facts concerning her activities are common knowledge here," Massiva told him. "She is an ardent initiate of a number of mystery cults, all worshipping the dark forces. The usual unpleasant rites, secret initiations, orgiastic celebrations. Three of the main ones, supposedly having no communication with one another, are the cults of Orpheus, Dionysius and Demeter. It's hinted that Alexander was conceived at one of these rites. In a way that is the truth—for Olympias was selected by the Dark One when she was a girl participating in the rites of a similar cult."

Simon shook his head impatiently at this. "I asked you for facts—not speculation."

Massiva looked surprised. "I indulged in no speculation, my friend. Why, the whole city lives in fear of Olympias and her friends and servants. Evil is so thick here that ordinary folk can hardly breathe for its stink."

Simon said shortly: "Well, I hope the information is useful to you. I've paid my debt, at least. Now, can you recommend a tavern where I can stay?"

"I can recommend none well, in this cursed city. You might try the *Tower of Cimbri*. It's comfortable, so I've heard. But be wary, take iron to bed with you."

"I'd do that in any event," Simon grinned, "with Alexander after my blood and me staying in his home city."

"You're courageous, Thracian—do not be foolish."

"Don't worry, friend." Simon left the house, remounted his horse and rode it towards the tavern quarter, eventually locating the *Tower of Cimbri*.

He was about to enter when he heard the sound of running from an alley which ran along the side of the building. Then a girl screamed. Drawing his sword he ran into the alley and, because he had become so hardened to sights of horror, hardly noticed the mishapen creatures menacing a frightened girl, save that they were armed and evidently powerful. The girl's eyes were round with fear and she was half-fainting. One of the twisted men put out a blunt paw to seize her, but wailed out its pain as Simon's sword caught it in the shoulder blades.

The others turned, reaching for their weapons. Simon cut two down before they could draw their swords. The fourth swung at Simon but was too clumsy. He died in a moment, his neck cloven.

Instead of thanking him, the girl stared down at the corpses in terror.

"You fool," she muttered.

"Fool?" Simon was taken aback.

"You have killed four of Queen Olympias's retainers—did you not recognise the livery—or their kind?"

"I'm a stranger in Pela."

"Then leave now—or be doomed."

"No, I must see that you are safe. Quickly—I have a horse waiting in the street." He supported her with one arm though she protested and helped her into the saddle.

He got up behind her.

"Where do you live?"

"Near the west wall—but hurry, by Hera, or they'll find the corpses and give chase."

Following her directions, Simon guided the horse through the evening half-light.

They came to a pleasant, large house, surrounded by a garden which in turn was enclosed in high walls. They rode through the gate and she dismounted, closing them behind her. An old man appeared in the doorway to the courtyard.

"Camilla? What's happening?"

"Later, father. Have the servants stable the horse and make sure all the gates are locked—Olympias's retainers attempted to kidnap me again. This man saved me from them—but four are dead."

"Dead? Gods!" The old man pursed his lips. He was dressed in a loose toga and had a stern, patrician face. He was evidently a nobleman, though his black-haired daughter was most unlike him.

Quickly, Simon was ushered into the house. Servants were summoned bringing bread, cheese and fruit. He ate gratefully. As he ate he told as much of his personal story as he wished to divulge. The patrician, Merates, listened without commenting.

When Simon had finished, Merates made no direct remark but instead said, half to himself :

" If King Philip had not continued his line, there would be peace and achievement in this war-wrecked world. I curse the name of Alexander—and the she-snake who bore him. If Alexander had been left to his father's teaching, he might well have carried on the great plan of Philip. But his warped mother put different ideas into his head—turned him against his father. Now there is evil on every wind, it blows east and west, south and north—and the hounds of darkness rend, slaver and howl in Alexander's bloody wake."

Camilla shuddered. She had changed her street robe into a loose, diaphanous gown of blue silk. Her long, black, unbound hair fell down her back, gleaming like dark wine.

She said : " Now, though Alexander's off on his conquests, Olympias terrorises Pela more than ever before. All comely youths and girls are sought out to take part in her ghastly rituals. For ten or more months she has tried to encourage me to join until, at last, her patience failed and she attempted to kidnap me. She will know that someone killed the servitors—but she need not know it was you, Simon."

Simon nodded mutely. He found it difficult to speak as he breathed in the girl's dark beauty, intoxicated by it as he had never before been.

They were troubled times. Times of high deeds and feats of learning; times of obscene evil and wild daring. Alexander mirrored his times. With one breath he would order a massacre, with another honour a conquered city for its courage in withstanding him. His great horse Bucephalus bore his bright armoured master across the known world. Fire destroyed ancient seats of civilisation, wise men were slain and innocents drowned in the flood tide of his conquests. Yet he caused new cities to be raised and libraries to be built. Men of learning followed in his train—this pupil of Aristotle—and he was an enigma to all. Greece, Persia, Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, all fell to him. Four mighty races, four ancient civilisations bore Alexander's yoke. People had speculated on whether he was a force for darkness or

enlightenment—whether he would rend the world to fragments or unite it in lasting peace. An enigma.

But now the year was B.C. 323 and Alexander was aged 32. He had ruled over twelve years—soon he would have reigned thirteen . . .

In the dark caverns of creation, existing within a multiplicity of dimensions, vital evil thrived, chuckling and plotting—crime.

For thirteen years had the forces of Light and Darkness warred in poor Alexander's soul and body, unbeknownst to the proud, grandiose and arrogant world-conqueror. But now the stars proclaimed that a certain time had come.

And Alexander suffered . . .

Riders galloped towards the corners of the world. Bright banners whipped in the wind as armies sped across the lands around the Mediterranean. Ships groaned with the weight of armoured soldiers. Blood flowed like wine and wine like water. Corpses roasted in guttering castles and the earth shook to the coming of Alexander's cavalry.

And now messengers rode to the camps of his captains, recalling them. They were needed. The final conquest was to be made. But it would not be Alexander's triumph. The triumph would belong to a greater conqueror. Some called him Ahriman.

Hastily now Alexander's captains mounted their chariots and headed towards Babylon. Many had to cross oceans, continents.

Every oracle prophesied doom—some said for Alexander, some said for the world. Never, they said, had evil clouded the world as much as now.

Ahriman had prepared the world through Alexander.

Soon the Powers of Light would be destroyed for ever and, though it might take many more centuries of completion, Ahriman could begin his plans of conquest and, finally, destruction.

There were more vehicles for his plans.

four

Simon lazed back on a bench and ran his hand over Camilla's warm shoulders.

"Do not the heroes of legend always claim such reward from the maidens they rescue?" he asked mockingly.

She smiled at him affectionately.

"The Camilla of legend, if you remember, had nought to do with men. I've a mind to emulate her."

"A sad waste."

"For you, perhaps, but not for me . . ."

Simon pretended to sigh. "Very well," he said, "I can see I shall have to wait until you eventually succumb to my undoubted attraction."

Again she smiled. "You have been here a week and I have not fallen yet."

"It was good of your father to give me the position of Captain of his Bodyguard, particularly since he is risking arrest if Olympias should ever discover that I slew her servants."

"Merates is a good and wise man," Camilla said seriously, "one of the few left in Pela, these days. He was close to Philip and admired him greatly. But Philip's son would have nothing to do with his father's councillors so now Merates lives in quiet retirement."

Simon had already learnt that Camilla was the foster daughter of Merates, that she had been born to a loved and trusted Paeonian slave who had died when she was a child.

He had grown to respect the old nobleman and planned, though it was dangerous for him, to stay in Pela and probably settle there. He had already fallen in love with Camilla.

And so he courted her and although she gave him no reason to cease this courtship, on the other hand she did not encourage him overmuch. She knew him for a soldier-of-fortune and a wanderer. Perhaps she wanted to be certain of him.

But they were dark times and Simon, rationalist though he was, could not be unaware of them. He sensed the gathering storm and was restless.

One day as he was instructing a group of slaves in the art of using the shield, Merates came hurrying into the courtyard.

"Simon—a word with you."

The Thracian propped his sword against the wall and went with Merates into the house.

There were tears in Merates's eyes when he spoke.

"Camilla is gone. She had to go on an errand in the market—a regular monthly visit to settle our score with the merchants with whom we trade. She has been gone four hours—she is normally gone one . . ."

Simon's body grew taut. "Olympias? Do you think . . .?" Merates nodded.

Simon turned, went swiftly to his quarters where he buckled on his leather belt bearing the scabbarded sword the Magi had given him.

He flung a blanket over his horse's back, rode it from the stable, ducking his head beneath the door beam, through the gates of the house and down the streets of Pela to the city centre.

He enquired in the market for her. She had not been seen there for well over two hours. Thinking swiftly, he headed for the slums of the city, dismounted outside a certain door and knocked.

Massiva, the black Numidian priest answered the door himself. He was dressed like a slave—evidently disguised.

"Come in, Simon. It is good to see you."

"I wish aid, Massiva. And in return I may be able to help you."

Massiva ushered him inside.

"What is it?"

"I am certain that Queen Olympias has kidnapped Camilla, Lord Merates's daughter."

Massiva's expression did not change. "It is likely—Camilla is reputed beautiful and a virgin. Olympias seeks such qualities. Either she will corrupt Camilla and force her to take an active part in the rites—or else she will make her take a passive part."

"Passive? What do you mean?"

"The blood of virgins is needed in several spells."

Simon shuddered.

"Can you help me? Tell me where I may find her!"

"The Rites of Cottyttia begin tonight. That is where to look."

"Where do they take place?"

"Come, I will draw you a map. You will most likely perish in this, Simon. But you will be convinced that we have spoken truth in the past."

Simon looked at the negro sharply. Massiva's face was expressionless.

They called her Cotys and she was worshipped as a goddess in Thrace, Macedonia, Athens and Corinth. For centuries her name had been connected with licentious revelry—but never had she prospered so well than in Pela where Queen Olympias danced with snakes in her honour. Though only part of a greater Evil One, she flourished and grew on the tormented souls of her acolytes and their victims.

The house stood on its own on a hill.

Simon recognised it from Massiva's description. It was night, silver with rime and moonlight, but there were movements in the shadows and shapes of evil portent. His breath steaming white against the darkness, Simon pressed on up the hill towards the house.

A slave greeted him as he reached the door.

"Welcome—be you *Baptae* or heretic?"

Baptae, Simon had learned from Massiva, was the name that the worshippers of Cotys called themselves.

"I come to take part in tonight's Cottyttia, that's true," Simon said and slew the slave.

Inside the house, lighted by a single oil-lamp, Simon located the door which opened on reeking blackness. He bent and entered it and soon was creeping downwards, down into the bowels of the hill. The walls of the tunnel were slippery with clammy moss and the air was thick and difficult to breathe. The sharp sound of his sword coming from its scabbard was comforting to Simon.

His sandled feet slipped on the moss-covered stones of the passage and, as he drew nearer to his goal, his heart thudded in his rib-cage and his throat was tight for he now had something of the emotion he had felt when confronted by Alexander's insanity.

Now he heard a low chanting, half ecstatic moaning, half triumphant incantation. The sound grew louder, insinuating itself into his ears until he was caught for a moment in the terrible evil ecstasy which the Cottyttian celebrants were feeling. He controlled himself against an urge to flee, the even stronger urge to join them, and continued to advance, the rare steel sword gleaming in his fist. The iron was a comfort, at least, though he still refused to believe that there was any supernatural agency at work.

Almost tangibly the evil swirled about him as he pressed on and here his rational, doubting nature was to his advantage. Without it, he might easily have succumbed.

The chanting swelled into a great roar of evil joy and through it he heard a name being repeated over and over :

"Cotys. Cotys. Cotys. Cotys."

He was half hypnotised by the sound, stumbled towards a curtain and wrenched it back.

He retreated a pace at what he saw.

The air was thick with incense. Golden light flared from tall black candles on an altar. From the altar rose a pillar and tied to the pillar was Camilla. She had fainted.

But it was not this that sickened him so much as the sight of the things which swarmed about the altar. They were neither men nor women but neuter. Perhaps they had once been men. They were young and good-looking, their hair long and their faces thin, the bones prominent and the eyes flickering with malignant glee. Naked, to one side of the altar, Simon saw an old woman. Her face was that of a woman of sixty, but her body seemed younger. Around it twined great serpents, caressing her. She crooned to them and led the chanting. Young women danced with the neuters, posturing and prancing.

"Cotys. Cotys. Cotys."

The candles spurted seething light and sent shadows leaping around the walls of the cavern. Then a peculiar golden orange brightness appeared at the top of the column to which Camilla was tied and seemed to twine and coil down the pillar.

Other shapes joined the dancing humans. Twisted shapes with great horns on their heads and the faces of beasts, the hooves of goats.

Simon moved forward, his sword held before him in instinctive protection against the evil in the cavern.

"Cease !" A name came to his lips and he shouted it out :
"In the name of Ormuzd—cease !"

A huge swelling of unhuman laughter came from the boiling brightness on the pillar and Simon saw figures form in it. Figures that were man-shaped and seemed to be at the same time part of the structure of a huge face, lined and pouched with a toothless, gaping mouth and closed eyes.

Then the eyes opened and seemed to fix themselves on Simon. The smaller figures writhed about it and it laughed again. Bile

was in his throat, his head throbbed, but he gripped the sword and pushed his way through the sweating bodies of the worshippers. They grinned at him maliciously but did not attempt to stop him.

He was lost in the pull of those malicious eyes.

"Ormuzd is too weak to protect thee, mortal," the mouth said. "Ahriman rules here—and will soon rule the world through his vessel, Alexander."

Still Simon pushed his way towards the pillar, towards Camilla and the leering face above her.

"Ormuzd will not aid thee, mortal. We are many and stronger. Behold me ! What do you see ?"

Simon made no reply. He gripped the steel blade tighter and advanced closer.

"Do you see us all ? Do you see the one these revellers call Cotys ? Do you see the Evil One ?"

Simon staggered forwards, the last few paces between him and the entity coiling about the pillar. Olympias now pushed her face forward, the snakes hissing, their forked tongues flickering.

"Go to her, Thracian—my son knows thee—go to her and we'll have a double sacrifice, this night."

With his free hand, Simon pushed against the scaly bodies of the snakes and sent the woman staggering back.

With trancelike deliberation he cut the bonds that held Camilla to the pillar. But many hands, orange-gold hands, shot out from the column and gripped him in a shuddering, yet ecstatic embrace. He howled and smote at the hands and, at the touch of steel they flickered back again into their scintillating parent body.

Then he felt the clammy hands of the acolytes upon his body. Sensing that he had some advantage, Simon dragged a bunch of herbs from his shirt—herbs which Massiva had given him—and plunged them into the candle flames. A pungent aroma began to come from the flaring herbs and the naked worshippers dropped back. The apparition itself seemed to fade slightly, its light less bright.

Simon sprang at the shape, his sword flashing like silver and passing through the hazy face which snarled and laughed alternately. The sword clanged on the stone of the column. Desperately, he drew back his arm to strike another blow, his whole body weakened. He felt like an old, worn man.

"Ormuzd !" he shrieked as he struck again.

Again the face snarled at him ; again the golden hands shot out to embrace him so that his body thrilled with terrible weakening joy.

Then Simon felt that he were all his ancestors and a knowledge came to him, the knowledge of darkness and chaos which his forebears had possessed.

And this knowledge, though terrifying, contained within it a further knowledge—the awareness that the Forces of Darkness had been vanquished in the past and could be vanquished again.

This gave him strength. Ahriman-Cotys realised that from somewhere Simon had gained renewed energy and its shape drew in on itself, began to slide down the pillar towards Camilla.

But Simon reached her, tugged her away from the column and on to the ground. Then he drew back his arm and flung the flaming herbs into the face of the apparition.

A horrid growling sound filled the air, and, for a moment, the face faded entirely.

Simon grasped Camilla and fell back through the crowd, slashing at their naked bodies with his bright sword. Blood flowed and face reappeared, bellowing with laughter.

Many little faces joined in the merriment, piping their mirth and detaching themselves from the greater entity to fall upon the blood of the slain.

Simon observed, with a degree of relief, that the beings could not pass through the smoke from the herbs and, by this time, the whole room was full of the pungent odour.

"Nothing can destroy us, mortal !" Ahriman-Cotys bellowed. "Slay more—give me more ! You may escape now—but I will sport with you both soon. The huntsmen of my servitor, Olympias, will hound you across the earth. You cannot escape. And when you are ours—you will both become the most willing of my slaves . . ."

Simon reached the doorway of the cavern, turned, bearing the insensible Camilla and ran up the slippery tunnel.

Now he knew. Now he could not longer rationalise. He had seen too much.

Now he knew that reason had passed from the world and that the ancient gods had returned to rule once more.

five

The body was strong enough. Ahriman had tested it to his satisfaction. He had given the vessel superhuman strength and vitality which it had used for what it thought were its own purposes.

Alexander, though he possessed little of his own personality now, was ready. Soon entire populations would be the slaves of Ahriman. their bodies bent to him. Darkness such as the world had never known would come. Ormuzd and the Forces of Light would be vanquished for ever.

Ahriman had many facets—many names. Shaitan was another.

Now Alexander's captains gathered. They were loyal to him, would do his bidding—would become Ahriman's agents in bringing Hell to the surface of the Earth.

323 B.C. A time of omens of evil. A turning point in history.

Alexander rose from his bed. He walked like an automaton and called for his slaves. They washed him, dressed him and clad him in his golden armour.

"Hail, Jupiter-Ammon!" they intoned as he strode from the room and walked steadily to the chamber where his generals and advisors awaited him.

Ptolemy stood up as Alexander entered. His master seemed no different, yet there was a strange, detached air about him.

"Greetings, Jupiter-Ammon," he said bowing low. Normally he refused to designate Alexander by the name of the God—but this time he was wary, remembering perhaps how Alexander had killed his close friend Clitus in Bactria.

Anaxarchus also bowed. The remaining ten did the same.

Alexander seated himself in the middle of the long table. The leather joints of the golden armour groaned as he bent. There was food and maps on the table. He stuffed a bit of bread into his mouth and unrolled a map, chewing. The twelve men waited nervously for him to speak.

Studying the map, Alexander held out his goblet. Ptolemy filled it with wine from a long-necked bottle of brass. Alexander drank it in a single gulp. Ptolemy replenished the cup.

Simon and Camilla had fled from Pela. The night was like a clammy cloak about them and lightning split the sky, rain hurling itself like tiny spears against their faces.

Camilla rode slightly behind Simon, following him in a terror-filled flight towards the East.

There was no other direction they might go and Simon needed to find Abaris the Magi and get his help, though Alexander still dwelled in Babylon.

Behind them now they heard the Huntsmen of Olympias—great dogs baying, horns sounding and wild shouts urging the hounds on. And these huntsmen were not mortal—but loaned to Olympias by Ahriman that they both might sport with the fleeing humans.

They caught glimpses of their pursuers—things of legend. Offspring of Cerberus, the three-headed dog which guarded the gates of Hades—dogs with the tails of serpents and with snakes twining round their necks, great, flat hideous-eyed heads and huge teeth.

The huntsmen rode on the progeny of Pegasus, winged horses which skimmed over the ground, white and beautiful, fast as the North Wind.

And on the backs of the horses—the huntsmen. The grinning shades of dead villains, spewed from Hades to do Ahriman's work. Beside them loped the leopard-women, the Maenades, worshippers of Bacchus.

Behind all these came a screaming multitude of ghouls, demons and were-beasts, released from the depths of Hell.

For two weeks they had been thus pursued and Simon and Camilla were well aware that they could have been caught many times. Ahriman—as he had threatened—was sporting with them.

But still they pushed their horses onwards until they had reached the Bosphorus, hired a boat and were on the open sea.

Then came the new phantoms to haunt them. Sea-shapes, rearing reptilian monsters, things with blazing eyes which swam just beneath the surface and occasionally put clawed hands on the sides of the boat.

Simon realised at last that all this was calculated to torment them and drive them mad, to give in to Ahriman's evil will.

Camilla, Simon could see, was already beginning to weaken. But he kept tight hold of sanity—and his purpose. Whether the Fates wished it or not, he knew what he must do, had taken upon himself a mission. He refused to attend to anything but that—and his strength aided Camilla.

Soon, Simon knew, the Evil One would realise that he could not break his spirit—then they would be doomed for Ahriman had the power to snuff them out. He prayed to Ormuzd, in whom he now believed with a fervency stemming from his deep need of something to which he could cling, and prayed that he might have a little more time—time to get to Babylon and do what he had taken upon himself to do.

Over the barren plains of Asia Minor they rode and all the nights of their journey the wild huntsmen screamed in their wake until Simon at least could turn sometimes and laugh at them, taunting them with words which were half-mad ravings.

He had little time, he knew.

One night, while great clouds loomed across the sky, they lost their way.

Simon had planned to follow the Euphrates, on the banks of which was built Babylon, but in the confusion of the shrieking night he lost his way and it was not until the following morning that they sighted a river.

With relief, they rode towards it. The days were theirs—no phantoms came to torment them in the sunlight. Soon, Simon felt with a feeling of elation, they would be in Babylon with Abaris and the Magi to aid them against the hordes of Ahriman.

All day they rode, keeping to the cracked bed of the river, dried in the heat of the searing sun. When dusk came, Simon calculated, they should reach the outskirts of Babylon. Which was well, for their horses were by now gaunt skeletons, plodding and tripping in the river bed, and Camilla was swaying, pale and fainting, in the saddle.

The sun began to go down lividly on the horizon as they urged the weary horses forward and already in their ears they heard the faint howling of the Maenades, the insane howlings of Cerburus's spawn. The nightmare of the nights was soon to begin again.

"Pray to Ormuzd that we reach the city in time," Simon said wearily.

"Another such night and I fear my sanity will give way," Camilla replied.

The howling, insensate cries of the Bacchae grew louder in their ears and, turning in the saddle, Simon saw behind him the dim shapes of their pursuers—shapes which grew stronger with the deepening darkness.

They turned the bend in the river and the shape of a city loomed ahead.

But then, as they drew closer, Simon's heart fell.

This desolate, jagged ruin, this vast and deserted place was not Babylon ! This city was dead—a place where a man, also, might die.

Now the armies of Alexander gathered. And they gathered, unbeknownst to them, not for material conquest but for a greater conquest—to destroy the powers of Light and ensure the powers of Darkness of lasting rule.

Great armies gathered, all metal and leather and disciplined flesh.

323 B.C. and a sick man, drawing vitality from a supernatural source—a man possessed—ruled the known world, ordered its fighting men, controlled its inhabitants.

Alexander of Macedonia. Alexander the Great. Son of Zeus, Jupiter-Ammon. He had united the world under a single monarch—himself. And, united, it would fall . . .

In Babylon, oldest city of the ancient world, Alexander gave his orders to his captains. One hundred and forty-four miles square was Babylon, flanking each side of the great River Euphrates, embanked with walls of brick, closed by gates of bronze. Dominating the city was the Temple of Baal, rising upwards and consisting of eight storeys gradually diminishing in width, ascended by a flight of steps winding around the whole building on the outside. Standing on its topmost tower, Alexander surveyed the mighty city which he had chosen as the base for his military operations. From here he could see the fabulous hanging gardens built by Nebuchadnezzar, laid out upon terraces which were raised one above the other on arches. The streets of the city were straight, intersecting one another at right angles.

Babylon which had brooded for centuries, producing scientists, scholars, artists, great kings and great priests, splendid warriors and powerful conquerors. Babylon, whose rulers, the Chaldeans, worshipped the heavenly bodies and let them guide their law-making.

Babylon, city of secrets and enlightenment. Babylon, soon to be abased by the most terrible blight of evil the world had known. The forces of light were scattered, broken by Alexander's

conquerings and Alexander himself had become the focus for the forces of evil. Soon the world would sink into darkness.

Desperately the adherents of Light strove to find a way to stop him, but they were weakened, outlawed. Little pockets of them, chief of these being the Magi of Persia, strove to stand against him—but it was almost futile. Slowly, surely, implacably, evil Ahriman and his minions were gaining ascendancy.

And Simon of Byzantium had failed to reach Babylon and contact the Magi.

Simon and Camilla had never seen such a vast city. The crumbling walls encompassed a fantastic area . . . Where they were still intact three chariots might have passed each other on them and they were over 100 feet high. Broken towers rose everywhere, hundreds of them, twice as high as the walls.

But the wind moaned in the towers and great owls with wide, terrible eyes hooted and glided about them, seeming the city's only occupants.

Camilla reached over and found Simon's hand. He gripped it to give her a comfort he did not himself feel.

Behind them they still heard the hunters. Wearied, they could go no further and their tired brains told them that here, among ruins, they would find no hiding place.

The slow clopping of their horses' hooves echoed in the empty city as they followed a broad, overgrown avenue through jagged shadows thrown by the broken buildings. Now Simon could see that the city had been destroyed by fire. But it was cold, chillingly cold in the light of the huge moon which hung overhead like an omen of despair.

The cries of the huntsmen joined the hoots of the owls, a horrid cacophony of fearful, foreboding sound.

But now they could no longer run before their hunters. Fatalistically they must wait—to be caught.

Then suddenly, ahead of them, Simon saw a dark shape framed against the moonlight. He drew his sword and halted his horse. He was too tired to attack, waited for the figure to approach.

When it came closer it flung back the cowl of its cloak and Simon gasped in relief and astonishment.

"Abaris ! I was going to seek you in Babylon. What are you doing here ?"

"Waiting for you, Simon." The priest smiled gently and sympathetically. He, also, looked dreadfully worn. His long un-Persian face was pale and there were lines about his mouth.

"Waiting for me? How could you have known that I should lose my way and come here?"

"It was ordained by the Fates that you should do so. Do not question that."

"Where are we?"

"In the ruins of forgotten Nineveh. This was a great city once, larger than Babylon and almost as powerful. The Medes and Babylonians razed it 300 years ago."

"Nineveh," Camilla breathed, "there are legends about it."

"Forget those you have heard and remember this—you are safe here, but not for long. The remnants of Ormuzd's supporters fled here and form a strong company—but not so strong that we can last forever against Ahriman's dreadful minions."

"Now I realise what happened," Simon said. "We followed the Tigris river instead of the Euphrates."

"That is so."

Behind them the wild baying came closer. Abaris signed to them to follow him.

Abaris led them into a dark sidestreet and then into a maze of alleys choked with fallen masonry, weed-grown and dank. By a small two-storied house which was still virtually intact, he stopped, withdrew a bolt and motioned them inside. They took their horses with them.

The house was much larger inside than it seemed and Simon guessed that it consisted of several houses now. There were about two hundred people in the large room behind the one they had entered. They sat, squatted and stood in positions of acute weariness. Many were priests. Simon recognised several cults.

Here were Chaldaeans, the ruling caste of Babylon, proud and arrogant-seeming still, Egyptian priests of Osiris, a Hebrew rabbi. Others Simon did not recognise and Abaris whispered answers to his questions. There were Brahmin from India, Pythagoreans from Samos and Crotona in Etrusca, Parsees from the deserts of Kerman and Hindustan, Druids from the far North, from the bleak islands on the world's edge, blind priests of the Cimmerians who, history told, were the ancestors of the Thracians and Macedonians.

Alexander had destroyed their temples, scattered them. Only in the far North and the far East were the priests of Light still organised and they had sent deputations to Nineveh to aid their brothers.

And Alexander's wrath had been mainly turned on the Zoroastrians, the Persian and Chaldaean Magi, strongest of the sects who worshipped the powers of Law and Light.

Here they all were, weary men, tired by a battle which required no material weapons yet sapped their vitality as they strove to hold Ahriman at bay.

Abaris introduced Simon and Camilla to the gathering, and he appeared to know the best part of their story, how they had been present at the Cottyttia, how they had fled from Pela, hounded by the infernal hordes, crossed the Bosphorus and came, at length, to fallen Nineveh.

Outside, Nineveh's streets were filled with a hideous throng, weird beasts of all kinds, dead souls and malevolent denizens of Hell. Three-headed, snake-tailed dogs, winged horses, chimerac, basilisks, sphinx, centaurs and griffins, fire-spewing salamanders. All roamed the broken streets hunting for Ahriman's prey. But there was an area where they could not pass—an area which gave out emanations which meant death for them, so they avoided this area.

For the meantime, Simon and Camilla were safe. But it was stalemate, for while they were in Nineveh, secure against the forces of evil, Alexander strode the golden towers of Babylon and readied the world for the final conquest.

s i x

Abaris told Simon: "Alexander slew your friend Hano, the Phoenician a week ago."

Simon cursed: "May the Harpies pluck his eyes from his skull!"

Camilla said: "Do not evoke the Harpies, also. We have enough to contend with."

Abaris half smiled, waved his hand towards a small table in a corner of the room. "You had better eat now. You must be very tired."

Gratefully the pair began to eat, drinking the spiced wine of the Magi—a wine which was unnaturally invigorating. Abaris said, while they ate:

"Ahriman dwells constantly, now, in Alexander's body. He intends to make a final campaign, North and East, to subdue the barbarian tribes of Gaul and the Dark Island, crush the Indian kings and rule the entire world. And, it seems, he will be able to do all this through his vessel, Alexander—for the whole world already responds to Alexander's whims; he commands the fighting men and a host of subject kings and princes. It will be an easy matter . . ."

"But he must be stopped," Simon said. "Have you no means of stopping him?"

"For months we have tried to fight the forces of evil, without success. We have almost given up and wait for the coming of Darkness."

"I believe I know what can be done," Simon said, "and it will be a cleaner method than that used by any of you. With your aid I must get to Babylon—and with your aid I will do what I must."

"Very well, my friend," Abaris said, "tell me what you need."

Kettle-drums beat and brazen trumpets sounded. The dust swelled into the heated air before the feet of Alexander's armies. Coarse soldiers' voices bellowed orders and the captains rode in military pomp at the head of their armies. Plumes of dyed horse-hair bobbed bright beneath the sun, horses stamped, bedecked in trappings of blue and red and yellow, bronze armour glinted like gold and shields clashed against javelins, lances rose like wheat above the heads of the marching men, their tips bright and shining.

Hard-faced warriors moved in ordered ranks—men from Macedonia, Thrace, Greece, Bactria, Babylon, Persia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt and the Hebrew nations.

Millions of fighting men. Millions of souls trained for slaying and destruction.

And ordering them, one man—Alexander the Great. Alexander in his hawk-like helm of gold, standing on the steps of the Temple of Baal in Babylon and readying his hosts for the final conquest. Alexander in the trappings of a Persian monarch, absolute ruler of the civilised world. In his right hand a gleaming sword, in his left the sceptre of the law-giver. In his body, possessing it, flowing through it, dominating it—black evil. Ahriman, Master of Darkness, soon to commit the absolute crime—the destruction of Law, the birth of the Dark Millenium.

Around Babylon, mighty armies were camped and it was easy for Simon to enter the city, for many mercenaries had flocked to fight beneath Alexander's banner.

Wrapped around the Thracian was what seemed to be a simple stained black soldier's cloak, but inside, lining it, was richer stuff marked with curious symbols, the Cloak of the Magi, it served to ward off evil and kept Simon, for the time being, safe from Ahriman's attentions.

That day he stood in the square surrounding the Temple of Baal and heard Ahriman speak through Alexander. It was dangerous for him to do this, he knew, but he had to see the man again.

Alexander addressed the populace.

"People of Babylon, my warriors, the morrow sees the start of our final conquests. Soon no spot of soil, no drop of ocean shall be independent of our Empire. I, Jupiter-Ammon, have come to Earth to cleanse it of heretics, to destroy unbelievers and bring the new age to the world. Those who murmur against me shall die. Those who oppose me shall suffer torments and will wish to die. Those who would halt my plans—they shall never die but will be sent living to Hades. Now the armies are marshalled. Already we control most of the world, save for a few patches to the North and a few to the East. Within months these, also, will be ours. Worship us, my people, for Zeus has returned from Olympus, born of a woman named Olympias, father of the son, son and father are One. We are Jupiter-Ammon and our will is divine!"

The people screamed their exultation at these words and bowed low before the man-god who stood so proud above them.

Only Simon remained standing, clad in his bagged and dusty cloak, his face thin and his eyes bright. He stared up at Alexander who saw him almost immediately, opened his mouth to order the unbeliever destroyed, and then closed it again.

For long moments the two men stared into one another's eyes—the one representing total evil, the other representing the forces of Light. In that great, hushed city nothing seemed to stir and the air carried only faint sounds of military preparation from beyond the city walls.

There was a peculiar communication between them. Simon felt as if he were looking into the Abyss of Hell and yet sensed something else lurking in the eyes—something cleaner that had long since been subdued and almost erased.

Then he was in motion, running for the steps that wound upwards around the Temple of Baal.

He bounded up the steps, twenty, fifty, a hundred and he had still not reached Alexander who stood like a statue awaiting him.

The God-Emperor turned as Simon finally reached the upper level. As if Simon were not there he strode back through the shaded pillars and into the building. That was where Simon confronted him.

Sunlight lanced through the pillars and criss-crossed the place in a network of shadow and light. Alexander now sat on a huge golden throne, his chin resting in one hand, his back bent as if in meditation. Steps led up to the dais on which the throne was placed. Simon stopped at the first step and looked up at the conqueror of the world.

Alexander leaned back in his throne and clasped his hands in front of him. He smiled slowly, at first a smile of irony which twisted into a grin of malice and hatred.

"There is a sacred bull in Memphis," Alexander said slowly, "which is called Apis. It is an oracle. Seven years ago I went to Memphis to hear the sacred bull and to ascertain whether it had, indeed, oracular powers. When it saw me it spoke a rhyme. I have remembered that rhyme for seven years."

Simon drew the Cloak of the Magi closer about him. "What did it say?" he asked in a strained half-whisper.

Alexander shook his head. "I did not understand it until recently. It went—

*"The City that thy father lost shall fall to thee,
The City that gives birth to fools shall bear a sword.
The City that thy father lost shall be its home.
The City that ye make thy home shall feel its edge."*

Simon brooded over this for a moment and then he nodded, understanding.

"Byzantium, Abdera, Byzantium—Babylon," he said.

"How sharp is the sword?" Alexander asked and changed shape.

A dazzling orange-golden haze burst upwards and a black and scarlet figure stood framed in the centre. It vaguely resembled Alexander but was twice as high, twice as broad and bore a weirdly wrought staff in its hand.

"So!" Simon cried, "At last you show your true shape. You bear the Wand of Ahriman, I see!"

"Aye, mortal—and that only Ahriman may bear."

From beneath the Cloak of the Magi, Simon produced a short javelin and a small shield of about ten inches in diameter. He held the shield in front of his face and through it could see unnerving and alien shapes where the figure of Ahriman stood. He was seeing the true shape of Ahriman, not the warped and metamorphosed body of Alexander.

He drew back his arm and hurled the javelin at a certain spot in the intricate supernatural pattern.

There came an unearthly groaning and muttering from the figure. It threw up its arms and the wand flickered and sent a bolt of black lightning at Simon who put up his shield again and repelled it, though he was hurled back against a far column. He leaped to his feet, drawing his sword and saw that, as Abaris had told him, Alexander had resumed his usual shape.

The God-King staggered and frowned. He turned and saw Simon standing there, sword in hand.

"What's this?" he said.

"Prepare to fight me, Alexander!" Simon cried.

"But why?"

"You must never know why."

And Simon leaped forward.

Alexander drew his own lovely blade, a slim thing of strong tempering, of glowing star-metal with a handle of black onyx.

The iron clashed with a musical note, so fine were both blades and the two men feinted, parried and stabbed, fighting in the Greek manner, using the points of their swords rather than the edges.

Alexander came in swiftly, grasped Simon's wrist and pushed his sword back, bringing his own sword in, but Simon side-stepped just in time and the blade grazed his thigh. Alexander cursed a very human curse and grinned briefly at Simon in the old, earlier manner.

"You are swift, my friend."

Simon disliked this. It was harder to fight such a light-hearted and likeable warrior than the thing which Alexander had earlier been. It was almost unjust—yet the action had to be made.

In and out of the network of light and shadow the two men danced, skipping away, coming in close, swords flashing and

the music of their meeting echoing about the Temple of Baal.

Then Alexander's soldiers came running into the place but Alexander cried:

"Stand back—I do not know why this man attacked me, but I have never fought such a swordsman before and would not miss the privilege. If he wins—free him."

Bewildered, the guards retreated.

For hours the fight continued, each man evenly matched. Dusk came, sunset flooding the Temple with blood-red rays. Like two archetypal gods they fought on, thrusting, parrying, employing every tactic at their command.

Then Alexander, whose earlier sickness had wearied him, stumbled and Simon saw his opportunity. Paused, deliberating the act, then rushed upon his opponent and struck him a terrible thrust in the lung.

"Go—be Charon's guest!" he cried.

Alexander went hurtling back to land with a crash, sprawled on the steps to the dais. Again the watching warriors rushed forward, but Alexander waved them back.

"Do not tell the people how I met my end," he gasped. "I have united the world—let it stay united in the confidence that a—a—god created that unity. Perhaps that will serve to ensure peace . . ."

Dismissed, the guards returned, wondering, down the steps of the Temple and Simon and the dying Alexander were left alone in the half-light while a wind blew up and sent a cold chill through the silent columns.

"I remember you now," Alexander said, blood beginning to trickle from his mouth. "You are the Thracian. What happened—I remember interviewing you and then the rest is hazed in blackness and chaos—what happened then?"

Simon shook his head.

"Call it madness," he said. "A madness which came upon you."

In the shadows behind the throne he saw a black mist begin to form. Hurriedly he shouted: "Abaris—quickly!"

The priest appeared then. He had slipped up the steps and had been standing behind a column. Others followed him. He motioned them in. They began a weird and beautiful chanting, advancing towards the hazy form behind the throne, making peculiar passes in the air.

After them, Camilla appeared and stood framed in a gap between two columns, the wind ruffling her hair.

Alexander grasped Simon's arm. "I remember a prophesy—one made by the Oracle of Memphis. How did it go?"

Simon quoted it.

"Yes," Alexander gasped. "So you are the sword which the City of Fools, Abdera, bore..."

"What shall we remember of you, Alexander?" Simon asked quietly as there came a commotion behind the throne which was now surrounded by chanting Magi. He looked up. The priests seemed to be straining to hold back some horrible force which whimpered and moaned at them, yet was still very strong.

"Remember? Will not the world always remember me? My dream was to unite the world and bring peace. But a nightmare interrupted that dream, I think..."

"Your father's dream and yours," Simon said.

"My father—I hated him—yet he was a good and wise king and moulded me for a purpose. Aristotle was my teacher, you know. But I had other indoctrination. My mother Olympias, taught me peculiar things which I cannot remember now."

"Let us hope no one shall ever know them again," Simon breathed.

"What has happened?" Alexander asked again. Then his eyes closed. "What did I do?"

"You did nothing that was not for the good of the world," Simon told him. Alexander was dead. "But," the Thracian added quietly as the Emperor's grip loosened and the limp hand fell to the marble of the step, "that which possessed you wrought harm. You could not help it. You were born to perish..."

He rose and called: "Abaris. Abaris—he is dead."

The chanting ceased. The black shape still hovered there, veins of orange-gold, black and scarlet throbbing in it like blood-vessels. Simon and the priests fell back.

The shape shot towards Alexander's corpse, sank down over it. The corpse jerked but then was still again. For an instant a face—the face Simon had seen at the Rites of Cotys in Pela—appeared.

"There will be others, never fear!" Ahriman said and vanished.

Abaris went over to Alexander's corpse and made a pass over the wound. When Simon looked there was no sign of a wound.

"We'll say he died of a fever," Abaris said softly. "It was well known that he was ill. They will believe us—we will let the Chaldaeans speak in Babylon for they long ruled the people before Alexander's coming."

Simon said: "I knew that clean steel could end this matter for us."

Abaris looked at him a trifle cynically.

"Without our magic to drive Ahriman out of Alexander's body for the time you needed, you would never have succeeded."

"That's true, I suppose."

Abaris continued:

"That was the solution. Ahriman works through many people—but he needs a single human vessel if he is to carry out his Great Plan. Several have been born in the past—others will be born again. Fanatical conquerors who will set out to rule the world. Men with superhuman vitality, the power of dominating great masses of people and driving them to do that one man's will. Yes, Ahriman—under whatever name he takes—will try again. That is certain."

"Meanwhile," Simon said as Camilla came up to him, "we have succeeded in halting Ahriman this time."

"Who knows?" Abaris said. "History will show if we were in time or not."

Simon said gravely: "I am not sure what Alexander, himself, was. He could have been a force for good or evil. He was something of both. But the evil gained ascendancy towards the end. Was I right to kill him? Could not his course have been turned so that the good in him could have continued his plan to unite the world in peace?"

"That may have been possible," the priest said thoughtfully, "but we men set limits to our endeavours—it is easier that way. Perhaps, in time, we will not stop short but will learn to choose the harder paths and so achieve more positive results. As it is we strive merely to keep a balance. One day Alexander's dream may be realised and the world united. Let us hope that the unity will be inspired by Ormuzd. Then it may be possible to build."

Simon sighed and made his body relax.

"Meanwhile, as you say, we'll strive for balance alone. Pray to Ormuzd, priest and pray that men will one day cease to need their gods."

"That day may come and, if I am right, the gods themselves will welcome it."

Abaris bowed and left Simon and Camilla staring at one another. For a long time they remained so before embracing.

—Michael Moorcock

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THE SEVENTEENTH SUMMER

BY K. W. BENNETT

o n e

Loki's leaving was like the rest. The women watched, sullen, something in their ageing faces that wasn't either grief or fear, but a little of both. The men muttered. The youths cheered once and then were quiet, some in envy and others dreaming that they would follow the same road.

Loki fought sadness and grinned as became a man, and checked his armour and the javelins that festooned his heavy warbike as he pushed it through the crowd to the gate. His warbow was clipped lightly to the bike frame with a quiver of carefully selected, aluminium-shafted arrows. His shield he swung by its neckcord so it hung down his back, helmet visor

up with the hawkwings attached to the helmet oiled and brushed so that each feather gleamed like burnished metal. He set his knife firmly in his boot and tested the fastenings of the equipment trailer behind his bike.

"Come back, Loki!" someone called. A youngster. The older ones would know better. When a young man, or woman, was chosen, they did not come back. They pushed around him again, a ragged throng wishing him well, and he nodded and grinned from beneath his Hawkpeople helmet, and swung his leg over the bike and set his feet selfconsciously against the pedals. He touched the gear lever, proud that his parents were strong and wealthy enough to give him a bike with speed gears. He couldn't see their faces in the ring around him, nor the village wizard, but he knew they'd be watching from the guard tower where their neighbours couldn't see his mother cry.

He waved at the tower. The village gate swung open and he could see the cracked concrete of the highway through the opening. He threw the force of his strong, young legs against the pedals and his bike began to move slowly, with the load of weapons and serums and dried food in the trailer. Then he went gliding between the armoured gate guards and they yelled something after him that he couldn't hear in the final hoarse call of the crowd. He rolled on to the pavement of the wide ribbon of highway and turned left so the rising sun was at his back and stamped hard against the pedals. The pushing felt good even with the sun already bright—it was Spring and cool enough that he could see his breath when he shot it out in an excited whoosh.

He pedalled from the clearing that surrounded the village wall, and the forest closed in around the highway. It was empty with only crows calling and it stretched westward beyond the limit of his sight.

Something stirred in the shadows to the right, ahead. Loki slowed, eyes narrowed beneath his helmet rim, peering into the spruce. A tall man in a cloak stepped into the highway and waved. Loki grinned and slowed and almost fell from his bike. He swore silently. He had wanted to look well because this was the village wizard.

"Loki," the tall man called and he smiled too. They liked each other, Loki felt. The old man held out something wrapped in cloth in his hand.

"Here, Loki. One of the old pistols. It still works and it has seven bullets."

Loki halted and shoved down the kickup stand on his bike and stood beside it.

"Are you frightened, Loki?" The old man had a beard, marred by the crust of a burn that covered almost half his face, and he pulled at the half-beard as he used to when Loki was a student and the wizard had asked a difficult question in history or mathematics.

"Yes," Loki admitted, and he thought a moment before he said it because he was one of the slow speaking ones. "I am afraid, but I'm pleased too."

"You passed the tests, Loki. So you were chosen. That is why you have your name, for an old god and a crafty one. That is why you are called The Fox. You are strong but you are wily. And you're full of all the learning in our stock of books."

"It's been like some kind of game," Loki said when he was sure that the wizard was through speaking.

The old man brushed at the great scar across his face. His hands were rough and the cracks in his skin were blackened. Soap was a luxury. Fats and oils were hard to come by.

"More than a game," he said. "You've always known it more than most others. The village is dying. Even the enemies that surround it, the other villages, are dying. You must live. You must go all the way the highway leads. I don't know what you'll find, but you must go and you will die if you fail. That's all I, or the Doctor know, or the metalsmith, or the armmaster."

Loki stood taller. "I'll reach the end of the highway. I won't fail the Hawkpeople."

The old man laughed sourly. "You do not honour us by going, Loki. You are not one of us any longer. You are a Traveller, to be killed for his goods just as we Hawkpeople have done to the Travellers who could not fight past our village or slip past it by guile."

He turned and looked back down the highway, past the village, eyes shaded against the rising sun. "You must travel swiftly, Loki. Already, you have a follower." He pointed, and Loki caught a sliver of light far east on a hillcrest that blinked like a hot spark for a moment and then was lost.

Loki squeezed his eyes so the old man couldn't see tears. He took the pistol in its heavy cloth wrapping and slipped it under

his breastplate. He didn't say thanks because he thought his voice might shake. He squeezed the old man's hand and climbed back on the bike and rode westward again and didn't look back, but steadily ahead, at the empty road, and carefully at the forest that closed it on either side for sign of enemies or wild cattle and bison.

He pumped west steadily until the sun shone low before him and its red glow was too dim to hurt his unvisored eyes. Then he turned off the highway and pushed the bike into the forest darkness. The bike concealed, he returned to the high roadway with his field glasses and looked long in both directions. To the east, behind, a metallic red glint just visible through the seven-power glasses. The follower was still there. He ate dried meat and dried corn and water and slept in his cloak and a blanket with a cover of branches, so that nothing could see him and only a wild animal could detect his odour.

He climbed from the shelter with the first light and was moving before the sun had crossed the horizon. He saw eagles and deer, but no more people or villages.

It was like being the last man in the world, he decided. Sometimes the bridges on the highway had collapsed and he dismounted to cross the streams below them—a dangerous manoeuver because he had to leave some of his weapons behind while he carried single loads of equipment across to the highway on the other side. He was glad he had the pistol.

Sometimes, as he pedalled the heavy bike over high bridges or hills, he could see the ruins of pre-war villages—almost gone or overgrown now, sixty years later—and with no life moving in them.

He grew less cautious and knew it for a bad sign, but it was hard to remember that there could be danger. Once, a small wolf pack caught scent of him and followed till he killed one with a barbed wooden hunting arrow. Twice he saw snow leopards, descendants of those who had escaped from zoos in the chaos of the Germ War, but they slunk back when they saw him. It wasn't a particularly good sign. It meant men were somewhere here, and well-armed enough to frighten the big cats. It was noon of the sixth day when he saw signs of human making.

It was a small fire, still warm in the embers, off the road. Whoever had made it was careful. There'd been no smoke for the remains of the burned branches were dead dry.

Loki, on his knees fingering the ashes, straightened up and grinned. Whoever was ahead didn't know he was coming, or they'd have covered the ashes. They could not be planning an ambush.

He oiled the bike with the beeswax and bearfat mixture used by the Hawkpeople. He had real lubricant grease of the old kind, but decided he'd save it. He pulled down his helmet visor and laid the warbow over the handlebars before he began pedalling, and slung the four javelins close behind his saddle.

The sun reddened and slipped lower ahead and he pedalled faster. If he could locate their camp, he could move in after dark and plunder them. He didn't need weapons, but he'd select their best and add to his own arsenal. This was dangerous business, Loki felt. Not the fighting—that was the code. But the forest here thinned to occasional clearings beside the road, where someone might pull off and see him pass when he couldn't see them. He pedalled faster and swept the highway ahead with the worn binoculars that he pulled from his equipment trailer. He crossed a crumbling bridge and halted on the far side. From its height, his binoculars caught a movement in the shadowed distance ahead. Something moving, very slowly. He swung back on to his warbike and pedalled swiftly, swooping down from the height in high speed gear with the wind pulling at the hawk wings on his helmet and pushing with a savage joy against his face and chest.

The dusk was with him. He raced the bike close along the highway edge, advancing swiftly. He could fight, or slip into invisibility in the forest, or retreat back down the highway. He fumbled behind him for the release handle to his equipment cart.

The glint ahead resolved into two objects rolling beside each other and moving away from him—two road vehicles. He tried to steady the binoculars as he rode and glimpsed a low-sided car with fighting men aboard, driven by a propeller that they probably operated through a footpedal device. They were firing arrows at the other vehicle, a rounded and armoured thing with a sail atop it. As he watched, one of their arrows must have cut the sail fastenings, for it went slipping down the mast. The vehicle continued to move, though more slowly and he gained swiftly on both of them.

There were four men in the propeller car. He could see only one head over the higher sides of the sailcar. He'd attack the

four, and winning, he'd turn on the sailcar man when the first four were out of the fight. The lone battler would be like himself, a traveller. The others would be from a village and must be destroyed before they signalled aid.

The range melted, he could see them clearly, though they were too intent on their running fight to see him. The sailcar warrior threw something, a white glare and cottony smoke, and the propeller craft swerved, tilted, crashed into the sailcar and they careened together from the roadway. Loki grinned behind his visor and stamped on his pedals and released his equipment cart and heard it plunge off the highway a moment later. Now, while they were crawling in confusion he must hit them. He screamed the war call of the Hawkpeople. The coaster brake caught, his heavy bike slewed broadside and he swung down, fitting an arrow to his warbow in a single fluid motion. The propeller-car men came spilling over its side yelling and one saw Loki and shouted a warning and then fell with Loki's arrow jutting from his stomach.

Loki knocked and drew the second arrow before his target had fallen. It wasn't enough to match the cross-bow quarrel that slammed his helmet and rang in his skull and blurred his vision for a critical moment. One of the propeller-car men was kneeling, cranking at the cross-bow. A second hauled a javelin from the car and braced to throw. The third locked with the sail machine warrior over the sailcar's side. The sailcar man swung a short axe with vicious speed.

Loki didn't have time to gauge that fight. He picked the javelin thrower for his second arrow but his aim was unsteady and he drove the arrow through the man's unarmoured thigh. The crossbowman stood and aimed, howling to distract him, and Loki hesitated for just a second before flinging himself round the warbike. It lured the crossbowman into firing too soon, as Loki planned it would, and the bolt whirred past him. He wouldn't wait. The javelin man was still on his feet. His third arrow hit the man but slid off his armour. Loki plunged past his bike, pulling free his shortsword and the knife from his boot, and spun the shield from his back to his chest with a practised twist of his body.

The crossbowman dropped his weapon, picked up the fallen javelin but held it spear fashion without throwing, eyes on Loki's shield. Loki drove his legs hard, shield high, sword low, knife jutting from his shield hand. The tall warrior thrust low,

aiming the javelin point beneath the shield. The error ended his life. Loki caught the spear shaft with his sword hilt, slipped it along the blade as his weighted shield edge chopped into the man's neck. He fell and Loki's sword darted past and beat down the warrior arrow-pinned to the propeller-car.

Loki whirled around the car. The eagle-helmet had smashed aside the sailcar warrior's axe, and chopped at the axeman's head, as the latter stumbled and slipped back into his car. Loki thrust and the fight was ended. Eagle-helmet slipped between the two cars in a clatter of lifeless armour, and Loki peered down at the warrior in the sailcar.

It was a woman. Loki felt sickness in his stomach. He would have to kill her. There was no choice on the highway. But he didn't like it. He clambered over the car side, kneeled beside her on its sheltered deck and freed his knife. He slipped the blade beneath the chinstrap, through the mane of gold hair that spilled from beneath her helmet and sliced the strap. Her black, plastic visored helmet clattered away and he could see her face. Her eyes were open. She looked at him with a fear-twisted face, but without sound. She'd already been hurt. Beneath the armoured kirtle, her upper leg was ripped, with blood flowing dark from the wound, and there was blood on her hair where the eagle helmet's axe had sliced.

Loki swore, dark face alight with anger. Not at her, but at the rules that say a man must kill or be killed, and put the knife point against the artery in her throat. It was a pretty throat, Loki thought. Tanned gold, and firm, and womanly for a woman who fought with a war axe.

"Can you drink water?" he asked finally.

She nodded, and closed her eyes. When he found a water bottle and brought it, she was either asleep, or unconscious, or pretending to be.

A swift check of the road to his rear convinced Loki that his follower had not closed in during the fight and Loki worked swiftly at smashing weapons he couldn't carry. He destroyed the propeller-car, stripping the bodies of their armour and stacking them in the cracked roadway as a warning. He grinned as he worked. It was a tremendous amount of loot. He had eleven javelins, three axes, four swords, tools and knives. Even phosphorous matches for firemaking.

He stripped the wheels and their precious tyres from the propeller-car and loaded it all into the girl's sail machine and

rolled that back into the highway. It had a stirrup device for supplying power to the wheels when the wind died. His luck was running almost too well, he told himself as he worked. There was a storm making up in the west, thickening the dusk and bringing with it a rising wind out of the east. The sailcar would run easily on sailpower alone, and at high speed if he didn't lose control of the machine.

He tied the girl's wrists as an additional safety measure and ran up the sail and the sailcar began moving west. It was May, and now he would make good time. He had a long way to travel before winter came, but with the sailcar he'd make good time. Loki the Fox grinned as the car moved powerfully forward at rising speed, and preened the wings of his Hawk helmet. If the eagle helmets' village was ahead, he'd race past in storm and darkness. If it was behind, they'd never catch him now. He pulled down the visor to protect his eyes from the wind rush and sang loudly as the sailcar sighed and creaked through the dark with the speed of the locomotive he'd read about in the old books.

t w o

Loki awoke at noon, hot even in the shade where he'd pulled the sailcar for hiding when the wind died at dawn. He lay looking, without recognizing, at the curved side-armour of the sailcar above him. Then his memory woke and he looked for the girl.

She was sitting up, with a knife held between her knees, sawing at the wrist thongs. Loki kicked the knife from between her knees and she spoke quickly, "I wasn't going to kill you."

Loki knew the law and he laughed. "You were going to cook me a fine hot meal, I suppose," he said.

The girl thought a moment. She was a very good looking girl, Loki decided, though she must be very young from his prominence of seventeen years. "I don't know what I would have done, but I wouldn't have killed you," she said. Her skin was bronzed by sun, almost matching the dark gold of her hair. Her thighs, beneath the short armoured peolum, were equally tanned. For a moment Loki didn't feel quite as condescending.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm seventeen. I'm a traveller," she put in the words.

"Any fool who goes this way must be a traveller," Loki stated flatly. "Who else would risk the highway?"

"I read, and know mathematics, and have read the old books," the girl added.

"All travellers read and know mathematics and have read the old books—if their village still has any," Loki countered. "What are the rules of the powers?"

"For all values of n , the quantity $a^n - b^n$ has $a - b$ as a factor; if n is even, $a^n - b^n$ has $a + b$ as a factor; if n is odd, $a^n + b^n$ has $a + b$ as a factor; if n is even—"

"All right, all right," and he stood and peered across the clearing at the highway. "Have you seen anything?"

"Eagle helmets passed an hour ago in a propeller-car. They were going east."

"Are you afraid?" he asked with careful nonchalance while he slipped on his helmet.

"Yes," she said. He liked her voice. "I'm afraid."

A light rain began to fall. He pulled a cloak from his equipment cart, fastened now at the sailcar rear, and went to work. He pulled his warbike from the foredeck of the sailcar where he'd lashed it last night, and ran a line from bike to car. With no wind, and the girl still unable to peddle with the slash in her leg, he could probably pull the car with his war bike. The girl talked as he worked, softly, watching the highway just fifty yards across the clearing.

Her name was Karen. Loki rolled the name over in his mind and decided he liked that, too. Her village totem was the turtle, which probably accounted for the curving shape of the sailcar. Like his, her people were forgetting old ways as the books wore out and metals like aluminium and magnesium became harder to find. She was well taught, but she would be, being one of those chosen to be a traveller. She said a strong number of villagers in her town were beginning to turn to idol worship, and once they'd burned some of their wizard's books. She knew metalworking, too. She complimented Loki on his sword and he swelled because he was proud of it too. It had been his first important metalworking project—built heavy at the hilt and light at the point, so that he could parry or smash through armour—and short for a stabbing stroke.

Loki explained his battle plan. Though it was forbidden for travellers to band together, they'd go together. If any villages had barricaded the highway, he'd go through the forest and flank the barricade. She'd make a frontal attack with the sailcar and her flash bombs, while he poured arrows into the villagers from flank and rear.

For the first time, she smiled a little as he talked, and he grinned back at her. But Loki was not a fool. He didn't think she'd try to harm him, but if she did he still could use the pistol and she couldn't know that he carried one. It was a most uncommon weapon.

Loki pushed sailcar and bike on to the highway. The crumbling pavement felt good again, even though the rain was growing cold and it made the concrete slippery.

He looked behind him at the bulk of the sailcar, sail now folded and tightly lashed. The girl, faceless with her helmet visor down, waved once. Loki waved back but the skin at the base of his neck tightened as he stepped on to the pedals of the warbike. She was at his back with a sheaf of javelins beside her and her hands no longer tied. He'd been trained to trust no one he met on the highway and the keen feeling of danger made his stomach a little sick. But he set his legs firmly against the pressure of the pedals and shoved hard, and the warbike and the sailcar moved forward, slowly, then faster until they rolled through the rain at a steady five miles per hour.

He pedalled slowly all night, straining to watch for trip wires across the pavement that might alert some ambushade ahead, but they had the special luck of youth and when the false dawn reddened the sky behind, the way was still clear ahead and he rode on steadily. Partly, he told himself, he was pushing far ahead to reach the rim of the Eaglehelmets' forage area. But he realized that he was doing it more to impress the girl with his strength. He'd be clever to save himself, travel in short spurts, so that if any villagers attacked he'd have reserves of energy to fight or flee. Once he knew it, he decided he would push on through the day if possible, and sleep at night. No more night travelling. Too easy to run on to a hidden barricade or an illseen alarm wire across the pavement. He wanted to be able to see the enemy far ahead and plan his attack. It was May and Loki was seventeen and a traveller, one of the chosen ones, and it gave more strength to his legs. He looked back at the sailcar rumbling behind him and laughed and drove faster—but he'd had time to notice that the girl's lips were smiling back from beneath her helmet visor and he thought that her lips were very red and her teeth very white and, all in all, she was a pleasant companion and a quiet one, for a girl.

The day passed, and a night, and another day. Loki grew troubled. It had been a long time since the last village, even in this desolate country. Surely they'd passed from the forage area of the Eaglehelmets and into country dominated by some other village group. He smiled less, and the girl was silent because she understood the growing danger. The country was flat and he decided he must be out of Pennsylvania and into Ohio, though the map the wizard had wrapped about the pistol was an old one and landmarks were difficult to identify. The forest thinned, so that sometimes you could see for miles on either side across prairie flatlands. Loki missed the cover of trees and hills that he'd grown up with in his Pennsylvania village. At least the river crossings were easier with the girl to help him, or the crossing of ruined bridges.

It was the tenth day after meeting the girl that Loki saw the guard tower. Loki was ahead scouting, and he crawled to the top of a low rise and studied the long highway ribbon ahead with his field glasses. A copse of hardwood trees about two hundred yards off the highway, he judged, and green now with a soundless explosion of budding leaves. His eyes caught a glint of metal and after a time he could make out the bulk of the tower, painted brown and green and festooned with wild grape vines, but a metal tower nonetheless, and in it would be watchers waiting to signal a village somewhere in the haze of blue distance beyond. He knew how they'd do it. Probably a heliograph, because his own village used such devices.

There was a good east wind making up. They might run with it. But certainly the watchers in the tower had seen this happen before, and the village would have a barricade across the road. There were other groves of trees beyond, and low ridges that could conceal a village easily enough. The village would lie from ten to twenty miles beyond the tower, he calculated. The guard tower would be at the eastern extreme of their forage area.

He could attack the tower, but they'd certainly have time to get off a signal. He slithered down the back slope, mounted his bike and raced to the sailcar. In his own village it was regarded as a sign of weakness to take council with a woman, but Karen was no ordinary clothes-mender. She was a traveller as he was, and therefore he'd listen to her suggestions at the least.

She'd built a fire and was cooking dried meat beside the sailcar, helmet off in the afternoon heat, gold hair clinging at her brow in damp wisps, but she seemed satisfied to cook while he scouted. He brought the warbike to a standstill with an unnecessary flourish. Her secretive smile as she watched made him redden, and he dropped his plans to confer with her at all.

"We'll slip past this tower by night. They probably do most of their watching by day, with as well-hidden a guardpost as that." He didn't add that however well concealed it was, he'd seen it; but he wanted her to be aware of the fact. He used the fieldglasses to check to the rear for their follower, and a glint of metal back there far down the highway indicated the follower was still there.

Karen nodded as she poured stew into an aluminium bowl. "If you think that is best. Will we halt then, and spend the night between the guardpost and whatever village it defends?"

That was exactly what he planned to do, but he hadn't wanted her to say so first. "We'll know better when we're past the guardpost," he said curtly. She handed him the bowl and smiled and he found himself grinning back like a ninny. Her hand touched his with the bowl and it seemed to Loki that his knees turned to water. What was happening to him? He mooned after this girl like a village farmer.

The eating done, Loki pushed the sailcar off the highway and into the ditch where it was less visible while they waited for dusk.

They watched the sun dip below the hillrim ahead in a red wash of light while she told him about her life in the village. Of what their books and their wizard had said of the germ war and how great the nations had been; only to be destroyed by an unknown enemy who set lethal bacteria and virae free in the major nations so that the war was over before most men knew it had begun. Loki knew the stories, but he liked the sound of her voice and he listened while he whetted his steel sword on a sharpening stone.

Like the wizard of Loki's village, her wizard had talked of the death-throes of the nations—how a few had released a handful of the terrible rocket-bombs and then even that had stopped, while the plagues raged and populations rioted to stop the firing of more bombs, and died off until only isolated villages survived—groups that would kill any chance wanderer who might bring infection into their group.

She spoke of the testing, how it began when they were children and how they'd spent all their time learning—the old history and science and metalcraft and fighting and hunting. A life like his. And like him, the feeling that though her village was dying, something was coming alive in her herself. A sense of some design, a guidance even in this decaying village that grew more sterile and dissension torn, almost, each day.

She told him one thing Loki hadn't known. That while hunting she'd lain in hiding, and seen her village wizard meeting with a stranger who came in a flying machine. They'd talked, and then the wizard left and the stranger walked toward his flying machine, but before he reached it something killed him—a bar of red light that shot from above her in the rocks. She'd told no one until she told Loki. People who talked too much, or asked too much, sometimes disappeared. Sometimes their bones would be found by hunters of the village in later years. Loki nodded. He'd heard tales like this last.

When it was dark enough, Loki ended the talk by standing up. "All right. We'll start now while the wind holds strong. You in the car, I'll stay with my warbike. If you pull ahead, I'll hold on and coast with the car."

She helped him roll the sailcar on to the highway and swung over its side, pulling on her helmet. The dark sail rose with swift clinking of rigging and the sailcar rolled forward and beside it Loki pedalling the heavy bike found it hard to keep up. They moved with the wind, swift and silent as hawks. They rolled past the tower in darkness, sped by the long slope of the hill, and on past till they camped.

Dawn, and they were on the highway rolling forward. They saw no watchtowers, but a haze of smoke ahead and something like great hovering birds over the highway, that became large as no birds could become large, and Loki could see them as dark globes.

"Balloons," he shouted, and she nodded that she understood. He'd never seen a balloon but he'd read the books and he knew what these were. They were big, with a network of lines over them and beneath each a long car with a whirling propeller, and he could see heads in the cars. There were six of the monsters and coming this way. Loki was no coward, he felt. But how do you fight a thing like this? They could drop ordinary stones and kill them both. Worse, there was little wind and the sailcar was moving slowly. "Give me the tow rope," he howled.

Karen flung it to him and began pumping at the stirrups in the sailcar and he tugged. The sailcar bowled faster, rushing to meet the fat globes ahead. Only speed could help him now, Loki realized. The balloons were swinging ponderously into line, a gauntlet they must run and he'd not be able to duck and dodge while towing the sailcar. Yet if he cut her loose, Karen would move too slowly.

As he strained against the pedals, Loki tried to remember what he'd learned about balloons. They could rise on warm air. These seemed too big and carried too much weight for that to be likely. Or they rose if filled with helium or hydrogen. Hydrogen burned, helium didn't. If he could shoot fire arrows at them, maybe he could burn them but he had no time for that either. He called back to Karen and shouted "Burn them," but she shook her head and was fitting an arrow to her short bow, used for arrow fighting from the car.

The first balloon was almost above them, heads peering down from fifty-feet overhead, its propeller spinning furiously as it fought to stay ahead of the racing ground targets. Loki flung his shield over his head with one arm, as a javelin hit beside the racing bike. Another came, a rain of them, and he veered slightly to spoil their aim, yet not lose his forward speed.

Above him, a popping sound and yells from the balloonmen. Karen howled a warcall, and he looked up quickly and saw the balloon car wreathed in smoke and remembered the flashbomb she'd fired at the Eaglehelmets. A second report, and they were pulling ahead of the slower moving balloon, but there was a second waiting fifty yards ahead and beyond that a despairing Loki saw the other four swing about to parallel his course. The balloon they had passed didn't burn, but he swung a swift glance behind and saw Karen fit another flashbomb to an arrow, face twisted beneath her helmet visor, and he guessed the balloonmen would have a hard fight before they made their kill.

The second balloon was above and a javelin almost tore Loki's shield from his arm. He heard javelins clatter from the sailcar behind, the pop of Karen's flashbomb. Then a javelin exploded the front tyre of his warbike, the handlebar twisted and he clattered to the pavement with victory howls from overhead stinging his ears.

Another flashbomb exploded and this balloon was unlucky. There was a rushing sound above, a wave of heat and screaming.

and he had a confused glimpse of a ball of fire spilling off to the north. Then the first balloon was sliding over him like a fat black shark and the others clustered in. He scrambled frantically for the stalled sailcar and crawled beneath it while falling javelins skated wild over the concrete on each side.

Karen was silent above him, hiding beneath the curved side armour he hoped, and he could hear javelins thud off the armour or tear away plates that fell clattering around the car.

Then, silence, but for an alien, popping sound. He risked a squint into the bright sky and saw a flying machine circling. The balloonists loosed a roar that was either fear or anger, but sounded hopeful for Loki and he thrust his helmeted head out a little further. The machine, a kitelike thing with a tiny engine and a saddle beneath it, swung toward the balloons and a red bar of light shot into a balloon. It exploded in flames, the balloon beside it burst like a fiery sausage, and the remaining three backed off with churning propellers. The flying machine was not content with a double kill, for it circled round again and the red lance of light exploded a third balloon and sheared the ropes holding the car of another. It buzzed away circling the last balloon, and the black globe and the harrying machine drifted away to the north.

They pushed west, frantically now, while Loki worked to repatch the bike tyre and Karen peddled and they hoped for a good wind. The tyre was wrecked and he had been allowed only two spares from the village's scant stock. Neoprene and dacron were no longer to be found, and certainly not the technique to fabricate them into a tyre. He sighed and pulled a spare tyre from his equipment cart and noted that the cart, too, was beginning to show wear.

Back on his warbike, Loki pushed forward more confidently, but somehow the spirit of the adventure was changing. The road ahead was long and hard, and even the warmth of June and Karen as a companion couldn't change that. The balloons were a weapon he could not fight alone. If he had learned that travellers have friends who fly in powered machines, he had also learned that the villages they must pass might be deadlier enemies than anything his long and arduous training had prepared him to meet.

* * *

t h r e e

Days blended into a blur of broken bridges, and repairing tyres, and slipping or fighting past villages. The land was changeless and flat, though the forest again crept back to the road. The road was unchanging. It ran straight and tirelessly to the limit of vision, two sunhot ribbons of crumbling concrete, with an occasional glimpse of a decayed town or city, or the broken remains of small buildings looking down on it with vacant windows from the low hills through which it passed.

The pair hunted, and Loki found Karen as deadly with her short axes as he with his sword. She had six of them and they were used either in close combat, or thrown. She could kill a rabbit, or a swimming duck, at short range as cleanly as he could kill with a hunting arrow. The country was rich with game: bison, ducks, wild cattle, even a few wild horses—a scarce meat animal in Pennsylvania where they were used communally in his own village as draft animals, and for meat only when too old to work. They'd only three left there when he came west.

On the twentieth day of June, by Loki's reckoning, they were well across Indiana, and he peered ahead through the long days for the ruins of Chicago. The wizard had warned there might be radiation there from the rocket bombs, but he was determined to see the towers he had read about in the old books, if they still stood.

Villages were further apart. They were chased by horse-mounted warriors, some villages had warbikes like his, sailcars were more frequent. The road was in better condition, which might account for the great distance between villages. Being more mobile, along the good stretches of highway, villagers could seize and hold greater forage areas.

He learned there might be another reason. It was the morning of the twentieth. He was straining up a hill, pulling the sailcar. The west wind was hot on his cheeks, the sun burned, and he was tired. That's why he didn't scout ahead and rolled over the hillcrest, straining and cursing the drag of the sailcar and into the face of a barricade. It stretched completely across the road and on either side and he was boxed in with the sailcar rolling down on him from behind. Karen's startled call and his own frantic scramble to dismount were the only sounds. Helmets glinted from behind the chest-high log barrier, but no weapons

or warcries came. The stillness was almost as frightening as the noise of battle would have been.

He tried to send Karen back with a wave of his hand though it was too late to do any good. He found her waiting with a war arrow fitted to her short bow. He congratulated himself sourly that, for once, she'd had her helmet on without his having to tell her.

He stepped from behind the warbike, javelin poised, battered shield up, as he walked to the log barricade and peered over. He was looking into a warrior's face. A dead warrior's face, from which flesh depended in drying shreds. The man had died at his guardpost, and hung there by a strap hooked over a branchstub on a barricade log—still peering with eyeless sockets down the highway he guarded.

Loki jerked back and sick fear shook him. Germs. The man was dead of germs. He raced back to the sailcar and seized an axe and Karen joined him and they chopped an opening in the barricade, carefully avoiding the dead guardsman. There were others back there. Someone had strapped them all carefully to the barricade logs so that anyone approaching would see a full guard complement.

They pushed the sailcar through the wrecked opening and on impulse, Loki followed the dim trail from the barricade back into the forest. The village was large, well fortified, but its armoured log gates hung ajar, making a dead creaking in the silence. Crows flew up, a black whirlwind from the street, as Loki pushed through the gate with Karen walking on his heels. Her eyes behind the helmet visor were big with fear and it made Loki a little less ashamed of the unwarlike panic in his own chest.

The village huts, of concrete and stone and logs, held only dead. All save one barnlike structure and that held what must be a captured flying machine. They must have been attempting to build another like it, Loki decided, when some enemy had released the germs. It was a rich, strong village. With its resources, it might very well have duplicated the captured flying device, wherever that had come from. Their copy was nearly complete, he decided, after looking it over.

Karen wanted to look for tyres, but Loki let her touch nothing. And back at the barricade and the sailcar, he ordered her to wash in the antiseptic he carried in concentrate in his equipment cart, as had every traveller who left his village.

"That was the way they died in the War of the Nations," he told her as they stripped and scrubbed. Loki's village had demanded rigid segregation of males and females through adolescence, and Loki still found himself shocked at Karen's immodest exposure each day when she washed. But he had become used to it, and, he had to admit, rather liked it.

"Yes, but no village would use a germ culture on another village, no matter how desperate they became. My village did not even have germ cultures."

Loki nodded and plunged his head into the basin of antiseptic and came up blowing and rubbing his eyes at the smart of it. "Of course. Our wizard had a culture but he finally destroyed it. He felt it was too dangerous. He would not even allow the use of anthrax as an arrow poison, though we all knew how to make it."

Karen finished drying herself and companionably began drying Loki's back with her towel. It was a kindness he accepted uneasily, at best, and one he'd certainly never have had the courage to return.

"We must get away quickly," he mumbled. "Sometimes plagues are airborne."

"Yes. Whoever did this may return. It would be an enemy we couldn't fight."

Before they rolled west, Loki returned to the hillcrest and checked the highway behind them. It was there, just visible through the fieldglasses. A glint of metal waiting far down the concrete strip. Their follower was waiting for them to begin moving again.

They rode west, Loki back in his harness and tugging the sailcar behind his creaking warbike; Karen pumping her foot pedals valiantly behind. And far back, the hot noonlight struck a spark of distant light from a metallic thing that moved as they moved and on the same track.

Another traveller? It would make sense, Loki felt, for another traveller to hang back behind them if he knew there were two of them travelling together. Let them draw out the ambuscades and cut a way through. But this man who followed them was too clever. He seemed to know exactly when they stopped, and where. He never came too close. He never dropped back too far. He was never halted by enemies Loki might have missed. Or if he was, he cut through them quickly. So quickly that he lost no time or distance, but held that

unerring interval. Whoever or whatever he was, he must be powerful and have strong weapons. If so, then he was a dangerous enemy. On the highway, it could be assumed that he was not a friend.

Loki's hand dropped unconsciously from the handlebar and shoved at his breastplate till the cloth-wrapped gun beneath it bit his skin. The cloth was a map. It showed where the highway led. And this was something no traveller should have. If the wizard had not been his father's father, he'd have neither map nor pistol. Loki set his jaw and drove his feet harder against the pedals. Let him come on. He'd fight for whatever he won.

The country grew sandy with hills rolling up around the highway and hemming it in. Hills thickened with forest and Loki didn't like the possibilities it offered for ambush. The roadway was well within arrowshot, even crossbow range, of thick oak and pine covert. Sometimes a single arrow came flying, and once a barrage of them from a broken bridge abutment that crossed the highway on which he pedalled. But no fighters followed, and there was a half-hearted, dying feel in the air. Once a man even stole on to the highway and watched them pass without raising his hands. He had no weapons, a thin and dirty blackbeard scarecrow with a face gaunt as a skull.

Karen, behind, stood erect covering him with drawn bow and flashbombs at hand ; but the man merely called. " For God's sake, traveller, if you have any food let me have some."

Loki spat and rolled past, glad of the shield and apron of helmet that protected his back and pedalled harder. Ruined buildings were common now. They saw occasionally the craters left by rocket bombs, but none had hit close enough to the highway to more than buckle its surface. He secreted himself at dawn from Karen and studied his map in keen excitement as he anticipated their approach to what would be left of Chicago. In another day from a high bridge he could descry ruined towers far northward through his field glasses. He could see men moving among the grassgrown ruins closer at hand, but they didn't approach.

They found a flying machine, too. It stood on a bridge where someone must have landed it when its crude engine failed. Loki and Karen examined it closely. Though this must be rude by the standards of the old books, Loki couldn't help but

admire the metalcrafters who'd built it. They must have been able to melt and pour metal by very advanced casting techniques to build the engine. He smashed it and then circled northwest around Chicago along a great belt highway from which they could see ruined home foundations stretching as far as the eye could see, until they swung west again and left this behind them.

The highway ran west through gently rolling country, turning again to prairie with only an occasional copse of hardwood scattered across it, or lines of willow and cottonwood along the streams. It was July and hot. The streams ran slow and slime-scummed.

It was afternoon when Loki had to fight again. The rider, astride a bike like Loki's save that it carried a long spike, lancelike, before it. He wore black armour and he came rolling down an overpass abutment with a whoop when Loki was still one hundred yards away, so that Loki would have to face his first rush with the sun in his eyes. Loki whipped off the tow rope and as the sailcar behind him rolled to a stop, he pulled down his visor and lifted a javelin from the cluster behind his saddle.

The black bike rider came howling a war song, spinning a sword above his head. Loki dropped one foot to the ground and flung the javelin. It went true, and the black rider swerved to catch it on his shield, his forward rush halted. Loki threw a second at forty yards and the enemy's warbike went over and he skidded in a clash of armour on the pavement. Loki howled his own warcry and stomped on the pedals and sprinted forward.

The black rider was on his bike again, but without speed and Loki whirred past the forward thrusting lance and swung with his sword arm as he passed—a blow that would shear a man's helmet if it hit.

It didn't. The black warrior threw up his shield and Loki's sword split it, caught, wrenched clear, and both bikes went sprawling down the slope into the ditch.

It pleased Loki to fight one who used his own weaponry and battle code, for the black warrior was hauling his bike back up the slope for another charge and Loki followed suit. The scorching sun was at Loki's back this time as he swung into the

saddle. He snapped up his helmet visor for a moment to smear away the sweat that stung his eyes.

They both wheeled a moment to gather speed and the black fighter came on with a rush that told Loki the man had high speed gears on the warbike he rode, as Loki did. The lancepoint fronting the man's vehicle grazed Loki's leg as he tried to fend it off and for a moment his guard fell and the black man's sword smashed at the side of Loki's breastplate and he went reeling off sideward while the other circled and came in from behind.

Loki hung gaping and choking over the side of his bike, but it was the fox's way and when the black rider rushed in with uplifted sword, Loki threw his warbike into the other's path and spun aside and the man came crashing down in the tangle of both bikes. Loki leaped forward, sword held low, shield high, but the man rolled like a weasel and Loki cursed as the man sprang erect and drove down Loki's swordpoint. Loki tried the shield to the base of the neck trick but the man caught it with his own shield.

Hot work. Loki fell back, panting, and the two glared through visors and circled in with the slowness of mutual caution and respect.

The black armoured man howled and sprang, sword low. Loki risked driving the point down with the lower edge of his shield so he could thrust his own sword tip for the man's throat. He hit, but the man wore a metal gorget, and Loki's point slid off over the man's shoulder. They strained chest to chest, until Loki dropped cat-fast and threw his shoulder into the warrior's kneecap. The other was as quick. He spun left, kicked at Loki's ribs, and leaped after Loki as the Fox rolled and sprang erect with shield over head for the blow that was sure to come.

The black breastplate reared before him. The sword sheared Loki's shield cleaving aluminium and plastic.

Loki twisted the shield, frantic to pinch the sword, but a sharpness, the devil's swordpoint, drove hot into the muscles of Loki's upper leg. Loki swore at the man's speed, but his leg held him up despite the shock of pain. The man leaped back, a grin of triumph under the black visor. Loki would have to move less swiftly now. The black armour circled to the left. His foot hit his bike and he stumbled for a split moment and Loki slashed and sheared the side of the black helmet and cut the visor rivets and the man blinked wildly at the wreckage obscuring his vision. Loki threw himself forward. His

swordpoint slid beneath the bottom edge of the black breast plate and the man coughed and fell forward slowly, like a tree in a forest.

Loki grinned down at him and spat, and turned to wave at Karen. The man's throwing dagger hit Loki at the side joints of his armour, low down and a red flame of pain shot through him. He grunted and sat heavily across the frame of his warbike and saw the black warrior's lips curve in a smile of triumph before the face went limp and empty.

Karen rolled up beside him and leaped over the car side.

"You were great, Loki," she said and began fussing at the side straps of his breastplate till he remembered the map and gun inside and painfully motioned her away. "Strong but not very clever," he amended. "Never turn your back till they are finished."

"I could have told you that," she said. "But you're supposed to be the Fox."

Loki's wounds pained when the shock of battle no longer numbed them. Worse the black fighter's tyres were as bad as Loki's own and each bike had suffered a slashed tyre in the hacking battle atop them. No net gain on tyres. There was the question of the black armour's village. He'd come from the bridge abutment. Karen climbed it and saw nothing but a single tower, two hundred yards across the prairie. It was a good tower, built around an old concrete silo. There was no signal equipment in it suggesting he lived and foraged alone. So Loki moved in and set Karen hunting while he waited for his wounds to heal.

There were bison here and she hunted them and Loki dried the meat or crawled painfully atop the tower to watch the highway in either direction. Behind, the follower still waited. Ahead, no movement save dark, slow-moving brown shadows that he recognized as grazing buffalo or wild cattle. He cleaned the gun, and studied the map, and cursed the lost time.

Thus he was first to see the flying machine come down. It was three days after the fight. Loki, feverish from his wounds, thought momentarily that he might be having hallucinations. But it was real. It spluttered and coughed as it circled the tower top where Loki stood and then slid down the wind and wobbled to a halt on the roadway. The man who climbed from it carried no weapons, but Loki knocked an arrow and waited. He could kill him after the man told him how to use the engine

from the flying machine, Loki decided. The man laboured up the abutment with wildly waving hands to show they were empty, and Loki finally left the tower top and scrambled down the inside ladder to meet the man at the tower entrance.

When Loki lifted the door bar and stepped back, arrow ready, the man slipped through the doorcrack and stood with hands empty and smiling. He was tall, wearing a strange helmet with clear visor and long steel points, like oldtime radio antennae thrusting from it. He wore a white uniform, that wasn't quite white either as Loki looked at it, but seemed to shift and blend in colour, taking its hue from its surroundings and making him difficult to watch. Loki tore his eyes from the cloth and realized the man had no weapon that he recognized, but a collection of white leather boxes attached to his belt.

They exchanged given names only, with the guarded distrust of the highway. The man was called Baron, a strange name like a title in the history books and hardly a name at all. He asked for food. Loki gave him dried buffalo meat and water and learned the man's flying machine had an engine failure. He was no traveller, but he said he'd been one once.

"How would I know you aren't the one who's followed me for a thousand miles from Pennsylvania?" Loki demanded.

The tall man grinned. He had a thin face, like old pictures of the Devil. "You were in the tower when I landed. You know whoever is following was still there when I landed." He wolfed the meat as he talked.

"Why can the follower always stay far, and never come near or fall into the ambushes I set?"

Baron licked his fingers and leaned back. "Infra-red. He has a scanner that can see the heat of your body—by day or by night."

Loki nodded. He knew something of infra-red. Heat radiation, it was, the wizard had told him, and had described instruments that could see this light invisible to the naked eye.

Far off a whistle blew, Karen back from hunting. Loki felt safer now that he would have an ally again. Loki wasn't quite as sure after Karen clattered in shedding her armour, for Baron eyed her in a different way—the woman-hunger way Loki had seen in the eyes of his village warriors when they were drunk on village-brewed beer. But the man was polite. Too polite. And witty. Too witty. Karen warmed to him quickly and they laughed and grew more gay as Loki scowled and grew

more sullen, till it seemed to Loki that Karen was deliberately flaunting herself before this newcomer and rolled her eyes at him in a most annoying way.

They talked late. Partly because it was a novel experience ; three meeting without fighting on the highway. Partly because Loki, even in his anger, couldn't pull himself away from the sound of Baron's talk.

He listened while Baron told of flying machines and how the earth looked from a flying machine. Of great dead cities and shrines, of strange villages, and places where giant apes lived and of huge birds called mutations that fed on men. Of wars and the great Germ War and Nations still alive across the oceans. Of ships, wooden ships, he'd seen plying the Great Lakes, though few of these and fewer each year. Once, he asked Karen with careful casualness if she'd ever seen a map of the route they were following and suddenly Loki was on guard again. A map was death, and the man must know that if he knew as much of the world as he claimed. Karen babbled on, apparently unaware of the meaning of the question. Loki grinned inside, for not even Karen would know of the map he carried in his armour. And it was good she didn't for right now she was clacking like a captive bird.

They turned down the lamp finally, and slept on the skins left by the black warrior. Loki was almost asleep when he felt a soft pressure and Karen was beside him as she'd always slept. Her lips were close to his ear and she breathed it more than spoke. "He'll learn of no map from me, Loki." Loki smiled in the dark, and then scowled. It was almost as if she knew about his own map and he didn't quite know if he felt good about that.

four

They started in the morning. Baron insisted on removing the engine from his machine and loading it into Karen's sailcar. He smashed the machine and hid the wreckage. Karen aided Loki in loading the dried meat into the car. At mid-morning they were loaded and struck west across rolling country. The highway was good, smooth and unbroken. Once Loki's young muscles overcame their wound stiffness, he could pedal swiftly and the warbike pulled the sailcar as it tacked into the strong westerly wind.

Behind them, the glint of metal moved as their follower moved with them. They moved west without incident. They reached the great Mississippi river, moving slowly but powerfully in the heat of July, and Loki chose a spot where trees overhung the water. It would take many logs to build a raft to float their considerable equipment, but the sail from Karen's car would make the crossing easier. He was hauling an axe from the equipment cart until Baron smiled and pulled a chunky small machine from one of his belt pouches. From it shot the red light Loki had seen before and he gave Karen a warning glance. The red light sliced the limbs from the trees. Baron then neatly cut the trunks and the logs fell into the river and needed only to be tied together.

West again, leaving their raft burning behind them. Small herds of buffalo and wild cattle, remains of towns and cities of the plain, and occasionally a band of wild horses that would stand on a knoll and watch them hurry past on the highway below. There were seas of daisies and prairie moons. Days of blue sky and high piled thunderheads scudding like fortresses overhead. They hurried west, because summer was full ; but if winter caught them on the north plains or in the mountains they would die.

Men again, riding tamed horses, who chased them and were driven off by arrows and the red ray. The ruby light was everywhere feared. Loki had a powerful ally in Baron, he realized—if ally he was. And always, behind, the distant metallic glint of the follower.

The girl and Baron talked. In the sailcar by day, about the campfires at night. Loki felt her drifting from him. In the manful pride of seventeen years and full warriorhood, Loki could not make soft words. So he made none at all. At first Karen seemed hurt, and he was a little mollified. Then, she seemed no longer to care ; and Loki found that wounds not made with a weapon often ache more bitterly than those that are.

Baron worked over the engine from his flying machine as he talked. Loki was trying to make new arrow shafts, with little luck. Karen sat still in the firelight, listening to Baron. Loki grunted sourly.

"You two are travellers," said Baron, head bent over the engine. He had a plan, he'd told them, to attach it to Karen's sailcar to turn the wheels, if he could get it running again.

"You're travellers, but you don't know why, or where you must go."

That was too much even for Loki's rule of injured silence. "We follow this highway. That's enough. It's the law."

Baron nodded. "And you still don't know why. I'll tell you a part of the reason." He began assembling an engine component and scrabbled busily among his tools. "Because the towns you left are dying."

"We saw some towns that died, and not too long ago," Loki threw in acidly.

"I don't mean those that died of the germs. Your own towns. They are a scavenger people. They live off the aluminium and magnesium and tools left by a greater civilization. They create nothing. It is a new Dark Age, save that this time there is no return."

Karen nodded, gold hair agleam by firelight. "The books are going. Every year, a few more of our books fall apart. No one could be spared to copy them."

"Exactly," smiled Baron, and stretched his long legs. "Soon there will not even be time for reading the few that are left, or learning mathematics. All of the villagers' time will be used for hunting. Even their crop seed deteriorates. And they cannot replace it. They will grow older, weaker, fewer, and they will die. Already the birth rate is falling and the death rate rises."

Loki shrugged off a chill at the truth of what the lean man was saying. Loki wondered how Baron knew so much.

"Our wizard believed the nations overseas, across the Atlantic, would still seek to destroy us if they could reach us," Karen added.

"How many books were there left in your village, Loki?" Baron asked.

"Sixty," Loki said shortly. He ought to know. He'd had to read them all.

"Weren't there people who were beginning to worship harvest gods, other gods not mentioned in the old texts?"

Loki shrugged.

"How many books were there the year before?" Baron pursued.

"Sixty-five," Loki admitted. "The villagers burned some when the harvest failed, before the wizard could stop them."

"It's happening everywhere," Baron said. He was wiping his hands on a piece of worn buckskin and Loki surmised he'd finished whatever he planned to do to the engine.

"We'd better sleep now," Baron stood up as he said it.

They slept and this time, Karen did not lie close beside Loki to share her warmth with him, but drew herself up in her own cloak on the hilltop above their fire. Loki said nothing, and slept soon and hard.

Baron and Karen were awake and working when Loki rolled from beneath his damp cloak. Baron had bolted the flying machine engine to the sailcar, hooked it by a heavy belt to the rear wheels of the car, with a double pulley between as a kind of clutch, and the popping roar of the engine came as Loki wrapped up his gear and stowed it carefully in his equipment cart. Karen passed him and made a face over the armful of weapons she carried, and he felt suddenly better and grinned back at her for the first time in days.

Loki hooked the equipment cart behind his heavy warbike and pushed it up on to the highway where the sailcar was ready, sail furled, engine roaring and spluttering.

Karen climbed into the car and Baron beside her, and Baron made an adjustment of the clutch pulleys and the car began to move. Loki swung on to his pedals and moved up behind the car and saw that it was gathering speed. He pumped harder, startled at how suddenly the armoured machine was gathering speed. Faster it rolled along the smooth concrete and he threw his warbike into highspeed gear and pumped faster, but a gap opened between car and bike and widened swiftly. He saw Karen look back, mouth open as she called something, and Baron was grinning. Loki called and cursed and pumped, but the gap opened to fifty yards, a hundred yards, two hundred yards. Then the car was gaining speed and leaving him further behind and he could see Karen struggling and Baron striking at her. Then he could see only the sailcar dwindling in the distance to a bug, and then to a dot, and then it was gone and he was alone on the endless ribbon of highway that stretched between earth and cloud ruffed sky. He stopped pumping finally, exhausted, to swallow the sadness that choked his throat and stung his eyes.

He rode until the darkness was thick and cold, a doubly dangerous thing to do. Ambushes were impossible to spot at night, and he was too tired to escape one if he'd fallen into it. He checked for the follower at sundown, a routine precaution now, and the metallic glint was still there, far down the highway to his rear.

When he camped, he discovered that loneliness isn't bad until you've known companionship. He built his small fire as always, in a pocket of ground, and ate his food on the hillside above it. At least now he could study his map whenever he wished, but it was a grey exchange for the sight of Karen or hearing her talk.

He returned to the fire and checked the map by the ember glow. He must be in western Nebraska near a town that had been called Ogallala. There was another highway to the south. It might be that Baron would take Karen by that route, if he was also seeking the highway's end. Either route led to the maltese cross that marked the end of his route, west of a place called Las Cruces, in New Mexico.

From habit engendered by a lifetime of training, he went over his equipment before sleeping, though his legs ached with tiredness and his eyelids fought to close. He sharpened his sword blade, checked the remaining sheaf of arrows. He had a pair of javelins. And, of course, the pistol. He snaked it from beneath his breastplate and removed the cartridges and wiped them with fresh oil, wondering if they would still fire. If only his bike tyres didn't fail. He might catch them yet. After all, the flying machine engine had broken down once before. Or had it really broken down? Baron might have been seeking a woman, and pretended the engine failure. But Loki dismissed that as impossible. He could have swooped on them from the air and destroyed Loki with the red ray if he'd wanted. And the puzzle of why he hadn't killed Loki as Loki chased the car remained.

It was too hard to think when he was this tired, and Loki pulled his cloak around him on the hilltop. Even the bitter sadness of seventeen could fend off exhaustion no longer, and he slept quickly.

The prairie rim aflame with dawn woke Loki and he looked eastward along the highway. There was movement there. He raced down the hill to pull his binoculars from the equipment cart and flung up the hill again. He fell to the ground to steady his elbows against the heaving of his chest and peered east. The movement resolved into a vehicle, something big, following on his track. The follower was finally moving in, closing at a steady pace. It was the first time he'd come close enough so that Loki could see his vehicle.

Loki loaded the equipment cart and pushed his warbike on to the highway with careful haste. He paused only to drive an

arrow into the ground, measure the angle of its shadow with a protractor from the cart, and then peddled westward.

When the bike pedometer measured another five miles he halted again, on a hilltop. The arrow-and-protractor measurement said he'd come the five miles in a little under an hour. He could see the vehicle behind him, almost make out its outlines without the glasses. It was gaining. Slowly, but it was gaining. By noon, he guessed, it would be within arrowshot, if not slowed by broken highway. He remounted the warbike and pedalled hard, using the speed gear, staring down at the worn tyre tread racing beneath him. His patching kit was exhausted. If a tyre failed, he would be afoot.

Up and down, pedal and look back, long rolling slope after long rolling slope as he pushed west with the warm wind on his face, watching the white clouds tower in endless ranks across the sky.

A flash of something white atop a hill on the left. A helmeted man, a warrior, astride a white horse. From the herds of wild horses he had seen since the Mississippi crossing, he'd known they were as plentiful here as they were scarce in the East. The horsemen would give chase. It was not yet noon. He was not tired. Let them come.

A bugle sounded behind him, and the drumming sound he'd learned to recognize as horses running on the hardpacked prairie soil. They ran them on the earth, he knew, not the highway ; because the horses were unshod and the cement would hurt the swift animals' hooves.

He looked back and shock gave fresh strength to his legs. He could see the follower's vehicle now, coming down the last hill. Between him and the car, a band of helmeted riders waving lances and short bows like the one Karen had used, the horsemen still unaware of the car behind. He wanted to turn and fire an arrow into them and slow them, but he hadn't enough arrows left. If they sensed the car behind, they might turn on that and he'd be rid of all his pursuers. But they didn't, and they were gaining ; running at full gallop, howling warcries, lance pennants streaming stiffly with the fury of their ride.

The armoured car seemed to gain speed as it hit the level below the hill. The grade of the highway was rising here, and Loki's bike slowed though he drove his legs hard against the

pedals. An arrow slid clattering beside the bike and another buzzed overhead like a bee passing.

Now. Loki slammed hard on the brake. As he spun, he was afoot with an arrow fitted to the long warbow. He fired one arrow, a second, a third, and a horse reared screaming and a man spilled from his saddle. The riders turned, split around the fallen horse, became aware of the car behind them. They yowled and galloped close to the highway to intercept the car, Loki forgotten. Loki grinned and doffed his helmet and waved it at the car and threw the bike forward again.

The car smashed into the knot of horsemen with power enough to knock men from their saddles. Over his weaving shoulder, Loki saw two cling to the car, the rest riding alongside firing arrows at its armoured sides with no effect. Then it was through them and still coming and he no longer looked back but faced forward and pumped till his lungs ached.

The rear tyre exploded with the sound that a pistol would have made—a cracking report and the bike slewed and Loki pitched along the concrete in a cartwheeling melee of equipment and bike and trailer and weapons. The car came on, stopped thirty yards away, and a man yelled from the port in its flat fore end.

“Under the car. They’re coming up the hill.”

He meant the horseman, Loki saw, now reformed and racing uphill toward car and bike, and he didn’t waste time flinging himself under the car. Above him, as he sprawled on the sunwarmed concrete, the car gave off a hot, oily smell, but its thick tyres gave him protection. A crackling sound, a red ray, and a slash of light scythed through the horsemen. Animals and men were screaming and they streamed away leaving a litter of wounded across the roadway.

Loki scrambled from beneath the car to be ready for whatever, or whoever, came out. What came was a single man. He emerged from a door set in the rear of the armoured hull—a wide, thickset man with dark features smeared with grease. His face wrinkled in a broad smile. “Pretty good piece of equipment, huh?”

Loki stared a moment and then lifted his visor and grinned back. “It would have to be. You’ve been following me in it since Pennsylvania.”

The dark man’s face still smiled, but for an eye’s wink it seemed to Loki there was a stiffness in it.

"You've been seeing me?"

"Since I left my village. What is this car?"

The man stretched, remembering cramped muscles at the mention of the car, and heavy muscles knotted beneath his black shirt. "Steam. It burns anything oily, and generates steam. We built it from a museum model of a car called a Stanley Steamer, and made a few improvements."

Loki nodded, remembering something about steam cars preceding the gasoline driven cars that were in use at the time of the Germ War. "I know of them. You're a traveller?"

Again that sensed hesitation. But the man nodded. Loki felt uneasiness, though any man who'd been trained in the way of a traveller would be secretive. After all, travellers were supposed to go alone, destroying anything they met. The last few weeks Loki'd learned that this wasn't always the way of the road, but the man must have travelled alone all the way. Certainly, with the weapons he possessed, the car and the red light gun, he needed no others to help him.

"We should fight for the car," Loki probed.

The man shrugged. "You didn't fight with the girl. Far from it, from what I could tell." He laughed, but it was a kindly laugh and after a moment Loki couldn't help but laugh with him.

"You are a traveller. You're following the road?"

"Naturally," Loki said. After all, who else would go this way. But it seemed strange the man could conceive anyone following the highway would be anything but a traveller.

"Then we'll go together," the man said. "You're warbike is finished. The car will hold two." As Loki nodded, he said, "We can hitch your trailer behind. How much further have we to go?"

Loki lifted his shoulders in an artful shrug. No one, at least no one who didn't have a map, would know. Either the man came from a village where the wizard was improperly equipped to instruct his travellers, or he was fishing for word of the map. And any village clever enough to have constructed this steam car had a more than efficient wizard.

They climbed into the dark, equipment-jammed confines of the car, which was hot and stank of rancid animal oils.

"Using tallow," the dark man said apologetically. "I've got some real mineral fuel oil, but I save it as much as I can, for emergencies." Loki nodded at this bit of wisdom.

five

With much of his equipment added to that already festooning the car's exterior, and his equipment trailer fastened behind, the steam car rolled forward. Loki looked back through the rear viewing slit and muttered a goodbye to the wreckage of the warbike and wished he could have brought that good friend all the way. And wondered again if it had been imagination or reality, that glimpsed lick of red light beneath him as the bike tyre had exploded.

The car moved with quick silence into the foothills and swung south as the highway moved into Colorado, and they fell into an easy if untalkative relationship where Loki did the hunting while Brant, the steamcar man, worked over his vehicle at the stops. The miles rolled more swiftly, and Loki began to think it possible that he'd come up with Karen and the man Baron before he reached the end of his road.

It was colder now, a few geese already flying south, frost on the sleeping gear in the morning, and clouds beginning to roll from behind the massive mountain front to their right. Purple, heavy clouds, swollen with rain that would soon be snow, Loki thought, and cursed the continual delays that kept Brant working over the car when they should have been driving southward. But dangers other than the lengthening season were slight. The car was a fortress, to be attacked by the plains horsemen only if they found it at a halt, and even then it was formidable. Loki saved his arrows and let Brant fight them with the red light gun, a weapon so terrible that few attackers braved more than one charge into its path.

Always between them, that slight sense of difference. Sometimes it seemed to Loki that Brant hesitated too long at intersections to the highway, as if he looked to Loki alone to know the route. To Loki, trained in a memory path of the highway since childhood, every turning was as much a part of him as the homing flight of a pigeon, or the seasonal flightpath of the mallard ducks. He couldn't understand, and what he couldn't understand he'd been taught in a lifetime of spartan training to hold suspect, capable of danger. So they remained easy in manner and slow of speech, but it seemed to Loki that each was taking the measure of the other.

Why else, when he returned to the car after a hunt, would he find the careful knots he'd made in the cords that bound his

equipment pouches and cart, just slightly altered. Not much, but enough that Loki could tell Brant was systematically going through his equipment. Looking for what? The map. Baron was looking for a map. He'd not find it there, just as Baron had been unable to find it, because it never left Loki's body.

Noon, at a high place, where the highway looked out at rolling mountain fronts, and Loki announced confidently, "We are in New Mexico." Brant looked at him quickly in the dimness of the car's interior and smiled. "You seem very sure. Far more sure than I am."

Loki was sure. He'd checked his map while hunting yesterday, after making sure that Brant was at the armoured car by doubling back to watch him.

Brant fussed with the gauges on the instrument panel before them. "The oil tanks are still well filled. If we haven't too far, I can make it. Are you that sure? You talk almost as if you had seen a map."

Loki didn't bother to answer and stared at the mountains rising ahead. Let Brant stare at him. Loki's face would betray nothing. He guessed he'd succeeded for Brant sighed and eased the car forward again. They rode on south and camped that night by a spring in the rock wall that overhung the highway. It was a place of great boulders, and it seemed to Loki that Brant was most careful. He concealed the car in the shadow of a boulder, hung a net of vari-coloured cloths over it, and watched the sky to the south as he worked.

Finally Loki, when Brant insisted they build no fire but merely burn a little of his precious oil in a can of earth for heat, put the question direct.

"Why are you more cautious now than you were when we first entered Colorado?"

Brant was almost surly, not the smiling man Loki'd known through days of travel. "We are near the end. I don't want to fail now."

When a flying machine flew over in the following dawn, Brant was fearful and angry. He swore at Loki for venturing from beneath cover, and insisted that no fire be built of any kind.

They stared at each other across the firepot at which they'd eaten last night, and Loki sensed that their travel together was ending. Brant wore his red light gun at the waist of the grease-

smearcd dark coverall, and the flap of the holster that held the gun hung loose. The squat man's hand stayed close by the open holster flap.

"You have a map. The old man of your village gave it to you."

Loki squatted. Somehow, people never expected a seated man to attack them. One of the throwing axes Karen had given him thrust its handle temptingly from the equipment rack near him, but he felt he could reach the throwing knife strapped to his leg more quickly.

Brant could have been reading his mind. "I took your knife while you slept, Loki. And that axe is hooked beneath the pack flap. You couldn't get it out in time."

"How did you know about the old man in my village," Loki asked. And he kept his voice carefully level.

"Because you have no village. I stopped there and destroyed it. The old man was hard to move to words. By the time he would tell me anything at all, he couldn't say much except that you had a map. One that showed where the road ends."

Loki tried to absorb what Brant was saying. The wizard, his grandfather, was dead. And Brant meant that his father, and mother, and all the rest were gone too.

"Yes, he gave me a map. And told me to keep it in my breastplate and to show it to no one."

Brant's dark face was not smiling now. He thrust out his hand.

"Give it to me."

"Why?" And Loki needed to know. "Why don't you kill me and take it from my body?"

"You will be useful alive. None of us has come this far before. You may be the key to the last gate."

Loki shrugged. "You are a clever man, Brant. What is this last gate?"

"Can't you see it?" Brant puzzled. "You're like a piece in a game. You are a pawn moving to the King row. You are being tested. If you are strong enough to make the trip, then you are worthy of joining the civilization they want to rebuild. And they must be stopped."

Loki frowned and looked preoccupied with the problem Brant offered. But he gathered his legs beneath him and his plan for attack was complete.

"Don't you see?" Brant demanded. "I'm from the New Nations. Across the ocean. We know they are rebuilding. Making flying machines. New books. Aluminium, even steel-making machinery. Weapons, probably. We need their knowledge, and we need to stop them."

Loki shrugged again. "You're right. I have a map. Here." He stood and thrust his hand in his breastplate and Brant, black eyes narrowed, dropped his hand to the holstered gun. Loki's fist emerged from beneath the breastplate with a bundle of cloth, but the cloth spat fire when Brant reached for it. Loki squeezed the trigger again, and the old pistol cracked flatly. Brant looked at Loki with a face washed of any emotion but surprise, and then pain and fear as Loki squeezed the trigger again, and Brant slid to his knees and Loki kept squeezing the trigger till the gun was silent and Brant lay empty faced and staring across the blackened place in the earth where the cook-pot had lain.

Loki loaded his remaining equipment into the car and destroyed Brant's weapons. He didn't know how to operate the red light gun so he smashed it. Then he started the steam generator in the car as he had seen Brant do, checked the water tanks to see that they were full, and rolled south.

The road grew more difficult. It wound through cold mountain country and roasting desert flats that heated the car like a metal stove. The villages were few but fierce, and when villagers dropped a clever ambushade on to the mountain road, great boulders ahead and behind, Loki was forced to abandon the car with its vital watertanks and race down the mountainside with only the weapons and food that he could carry.

He passed a place where a terrible battle must have been fought, for the earth was pitted with giant craters and the road was buckled. He passed a sign though, that gave new strength to his legs. Karen's bow, broken but recognizable, had been thrust into the ground and propped erect with rocks as a sign that she was alive and ahead of him somewhere. He wondered how the sailcar could have passed the broken length of road, but it was more difficult to think nowadays, and he forgot the problem as he toiled over broken rock and shattered highway beneath a sun that beat with a silent, sapping fury at his broken helmet and made his head ache and his eyes burn.

Las Cruces had been a goodly city, Loki found, and little looted. The air was dry and much of the ferrous metal objects were well preserved. Even the street signs were often legible. He was able to build a good sized cart. It was three-wheeled, and would hold many water bottles. He even found canned food belonging to the great ages of the past, but declined to eat it. Instead, he snared small game.

In a store marked "Sporting Goods" on its sand-scoured front, he found a trove of six arrows, giving him thirteen good arrows for defence. He gutted an old piano and restrung his bow. As he walked the silent streets inspecting his snares and hunting for water bottles, it seemed to Loki that his whole life was a preparation for this final trip. For he even knew what the desert would be like, he knew that there were poisonous reptiles and insects there—he knew everything he needed to know to set out on foot across a blazing track of desert.

He sought signs of Karen, but found nothing. Once a flying machine circled the town hunting for something, but he stayed in the buildings and watched it circle low over the streets. Probably seeking him, he decided. Brant and Baron had proved themselves enemies. But when would he find a friend?

While he waited and repaired his equipment and armour, and resoled his sandals, he faced the growing excitement of knowing that ahead lay the end of his journeying. He felt that he was at his peak—incredibly hard now. His strength had grown on the journey, muscles toughened and quickened, to a dangerous and wiry strength, and he felt that he was a match for any man. If men waited there beyond the desert. And it was not some kind of beast that devoured men, as some of the more degenerate villagers had claimed to believe.

He walked the dead streets for the final time, and went to look at the crumbling buildings of the college, and then in the cooling dusk he set himself to the handles of his cart and pushed it out of Las Cruces with the Pole Star on his right hand down the last length of crumbling road.

The desert would be bad, that Loki had known. That it could be as bad as it was would have seemed impossible. In some places the road vanished entirely, buried by flash floods or drifting sand, or even vicious desert vegetation. He slept by day in the shade beneath his cart, and marched by starlight and moonlight at night. But sometimes the road was too hard to follow in the chill night, and he would march on into the day,

pushing his precious cart of water bottles and methodically burying any trash or broken water bottles so as to leave no sign of his passing.

The land was strangely cold by night, though a furnace by day. But it rolled beneath the cart wheels at a steady pace and Loki chewed the dried meat stored in the cart and pushed steadily forward without pausing. On the fifth day he reached a stream and a small town, and refilled his water bottles. He would like to have hunted food, but this town had been looted heavily, and that meant there were villagers near here. Judging from the wrecked look of the town, they were badly in want of supplies, too. He pushed on, stopping only long enough to see if they might have missed some weapons, but they hadn't. Only one. Thrust into a signboard where it could be seen the length of the town's main street, he found one of Karen's axes. Loki's heart surged and he saw himself quelling Baron in a fierce battle and then Karen running to him in awe at his great fighting ability. But the dream faded and dimmed and became the back end of the cart and Loki found himself pushing the cart on west at a quickened pace.

The broken concrete of the roadway and the spiny desert plants were cutting through his sandals again, and he hoped that Lordsburg would be in better condition than the town he'd just passed. He walked, staring down at the torn sandals, lifting and falling in shambling monotony behind the cart's wobbling rear wheel until something moved that caught the tail of his eye. It was dawn. Soon he'd bed down for the day, living like the snakes, he thought wryly. The rising light caught something again, off to his right. A dustplume that hung low over the desert floor marking a movement parallel to his course, but at a much faster pace so that it would pass him and still be indistinguishable in the morning shadow and screen of desert plants.

The memory of the wrecked town came back and Loki marched faster and set his arrows tail up at the rear of his cart where he'd be able to load them quickly into his bow. Rising sun, glinting now fully across the tangle of desert growth made the dustplume become more difficult to distinguish though he could see it yet as a wisp of smokelike grey, almost invisible, now well ahead of him and moving across his path.

He knew, suddenly, what it would be. Horsemen. He'd seen enough of them to the north. Surely horses could survive

here in the desert if men cared for them and kept caches of water to sustain their mounts. He swore by the new gods and by the old one and by his village. Horsemen were deadly fighters. Even if you killed the rider, his mount could trample you to death in a charge. He'd learned that far back along the highway.

On impulse, he swung the cart off the highway and into a cluster of thorny scrub and cactus and hunched low through the day, sleeping lightly with his bow in one hand and sword in the other. The enemy, if enemy it was, made no visible move to close with him.

It could have been wild horses or wild cattle, Loki mused as he lay in the heat. The infusions of brucellosis and rinderpest hadn't destroyed all livestock. Some had survived and gone wild. Not much, but some. Obviously, plainsmen had kept a few animals alive in their own villages. But Loki prowled the rim of his chaparall and cactus thicket, the precious field glasses sweeping the bowl in which he lay. They were good glasses. With hoods, so they'd send no chance reflection into an enemy's eye. And with their seven power objectives, Loki was seven times closer to his enemy than his enemy was to him.

He watched for traces of dust, but the animals or horsemen, whichever they might be, were lying low waiting for something. Animals seek cover in the heat of the day. But so would an enemy who wanted Loki to think merely wild animals were grazing in the vicinity. Loki decided he'd move again, after dark, as he had been. It cost him the advantage of his farseeing field glasses. And it exposed him to the peril of ambush. But he was close to his goal now. He would keep marching.

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The western rim faded from red-gold to thickening purple and Loki eased the cart on to the highway, pushed forward carefully, probing the dark for sound, swearing softly when the cart wheels grated over a badly broken length of paving. One hour, two hours. He halted to listen, and wait. He crawled away from the cart silently and waited along his own backtrail as an animal would do. It came to him as he lay there that the desert was, by night, a singularly noisy place. There were scrapings and scuttlings that began almost as soon as he lay

quiet in the thick dark at the base of a boulder. The squeak of a dying desert mouse, the whirl of some hunting bird, and a thin thread of sound that was something else. Loki stiffened as he waited and the coldness of danger ran down his back. This was a steady scraping that moved, was silent a long moment, then moved steadily again. The sound of a heavy body dragging over dry earth and weeds. A man crawling. And getting close.

Loki eased the black knife from his legging and waited. The crawling moved past, above him, along the highway. Loki waited.

They had made dust ahead of him earlier in the day, after they had dropped a force behind him. The rear party was now making a surprise attack rather than a reconnaissance, Loki calculated, and the force up ahead would be waiting in ambush. If the surprise attack knocked him out, fine. If he fled from it, he'd run on to the ambush. Loki grinned and wiped the beads of sweat from under his nose and wondered how he could perspire when the desert night had seemed so chill. They'd sent one man along the highway above him. With this scout out ahead, there would be flankers coming along in the ditches, and Loki was in the shadow of his boulder just above the ditch. Thus far, he decided, he had done well. The man ahead would have to crawl fully seventy-five yards to reach the cart before he'd find Loki wasn't there. Then he'd take some time to reconnoiter.

Sounds in the ditch. A man, walking upright. It was almost too easy. Loki gambled there was no one behind this one and struck hard with the knife as the man drifted silently past his boulder. The man wore no armour. He fell silently into Loki's arms. Loki muttered. The man had only a short horseman's bow with arrows too short for Loki's longbow.

Loki moved silently up on to the roadway, crossed, and into the ditch on the other side. No sound. He lay flat. There, ahead of him, stars flickered. He moved forward, but the man heard and turned and hissed something, expecting a friend. Loki muttered, "Yes, yes, I'm coming," and came. Swiftly in two long strides and the knife flickered again and the man fell. He carried a lance and a short axe and Loki placed them carefully beside the highway where he could return for them. The third man was more dangerous. He'd heard something behind him, but didn't dare call his comrades. So he waited. Loki threw the spear. It hit the cart and went clattering into

the dark. The man yelled. Loki yelled and threw the axe. It was a wild shot, but it unnerved the scout and he came sprinting back down the roadway and on to Loki's waiting knife.

Loki listened. The night was quiet again against the rising whisper of the night wind. Even the animals were silent in this moment. He couldn't advance, the ambush would be waiting. Loki took his bow and recovered Karen's throwing axe and his sword and crawled back into the bush and finished the night in an uneasy struggle to stay alert, yet get rest for the battle that would come tomorrow.

The false dawn, a luminous half-seeing across the desert, and Loki moved forward with his cart. He missed his shield now. But these horsemen were unarmoured, and he still had his helmet and back and breastplates, and his armplates and greaves. He shoved the bumping cart forward, watching the highway to either side. It lay above the desert floor, but in this swimming light, he couldn't see much. He suddenly realized that he didn't need to. There was a drumming at his rear, and a horseman broke from cover and raced along the ditch and fired an arrow as he clattered past, just yards away. He fired an arrow that glanced off Loki's visor, and continued on up the ditch and that was a bad error, for his unprotected back drew Loki's shaft as a wasp goes to its nest and the man howled and slipped from the horse's back.

A rider on the left, and Loki missed that one but drove the shaft into the horse's ribs as the man passed and the horse staggered as it ran ahead. Loki's war arrows were forty inches long, aluminium shafted with a head of stainless steel honed to hair-slicing sharpness—murderous weapons, but he had only eleven of them left. He pulled Karen's axe from his belt and his sword and laid them atop the cart and pushed forward.

The horsemen came up again, from the rear, more careful now, two on each side of the highway, ready to dash in for a kill. They were better armed, with bows and long straight swords as well. Loki whirled and fired as they came. Loki was a good bowman. In his village he'd been the best in his age group. The first horseman on the right galloped past, but he was looking down in a kind of fascination at the feathered shaft jutting from his chest and he fell as his horse passed the cart. Loki nocked a second arrow and drove it into the shoulder of the horse bearing down from the right and the animal screamed and swerved away, but the other two were

abreast of him and arrows came and Loki dropped between the cart shafts, to come up with a third arrow drawn and another horseman went swaying away in his crude saddle, clawing behind him for the gleaming rod planted squarely between his shoulder blades.

The fourth horseman veered and angled away into the growth and was lost to sight. Loki swallowed a little water from one of his bottles and pushed forward. He had cut them badly. They'd attack only in strong force now, or by guile. But they'd be less confident, more fearful, and that was good for Loki. He'd seen their faces. Some degenerate type of villager, for they wore skin clothes and painted their faces with red and yellow colours. It gave them a fierce look and probably meant they'd taken up some newer goods, but paint is poor armour, and Loki felt sure he could handle anything but a mass attack where their numbers might combine with their speed and weight to smash him down.

Only Loki's thighs were unprotected from their short arrows, and because he'd been wounded in the thigh once before, he didn't like the idea. He searched through the gear in the cart but found nothing from which to fashion more armour, and all the time he kept pushing toward the distant range of hills that marked the end of his journey.

Time was running out. Behind him a drumming and out of the rising sun they came, four horsemen on each side of the road, the files pouring arrows. Aimed for his head and chest, they bounced from his helmet and visor and breastplate. They were shooting well, but Loki had no time to return their fire for a second wave of horsemen, six abreast, came shrilling down the highway from behind. Loki fired with unhurried precision and split the wave as two horses fell and two more riders spilled from their own screaming mounts in a thunder of sun-limned dust and struggling men.

The first band of eight, now ahead, turned and poured back. Loki fired his last three arrows across the cart at them and emptied two saddles. They poured around the solidly built cart and Loki met them with his shortsword and the axe, and at close quarters his short sword licked up at them where their long swords were difficult to manoeuvre in the press of men and animals, impossible to thrust at the elusive, capering footsoldier beneath them.

Loki missed his shield. Thrust and swing, thrust and parry. A horse reared up over Loki and he smashed the man from the saddle with the spiked back of the handaxe. A long sword flashed down and Loki caught it on the axe haft and drove his own blade at the man's throat. He howled the war song of the Hawkpeople as his black blade darted beneath their long swords and another man pitched off the far side of his horse and one horse went down with a cut tendon, and then the rolling mass carried past him, spilled off the road and vanished into the chaparral and it was quiet.

They had him now. Without arrows, they could stand back, find the gaps in his armour with their own short arrows. Loki worked with the knife, cutting his war arrows from the fallen. Bloody, insensate work, that must be done or they'd kill him. Loki felt no compassion for the fallen horsemen or their animals. It had been a great battle. If they ran him down in the next charge, he had still fought the great battle of his life and he wished Karen and his wizard could have seen him. He sang the Hawk song to keep his spirit strong but it sounded thin and flat out here in the desert silence, so he fell quiet and worked at recovering his arrows. Only four of them. Only four. He would stay close to the cart. Its solid bulk kept them from riding him down from behind, and he could even roll beneath it and come up on the other side, if they milled in one spot as they had in the last attack.

Push the cart. He pushed, and an arrow sang from the undergrowth and clattered from his visor. Another, and then one whistled low past his unprotected legs and he swore and stopped and searched the underbrush with his field glasses until he saw a shoulder thrusting from behind a giant cactus and he put an arrow through the shoulder and roared savage satisfaction at the man's coughing yell.

He pushed the cart, and they came from behind him in a rush. Four of them along the highway, and he emptied two more saddles with two more arrows, and the remaining two split off the roadway and down its sides to shelter in the bush.

He pushed the cart, and saw four of them ahead of him waiting afoot. He put an arrow, his last, through one's thigh, and the blue painted man sat down in the highway with a grunt of pain. Loki pushed the cart toward them, but the three held their ground. He pushed the cart till it almost touched them and they came slamming around the sides. One tried to come

over the cart, but met Karen's axe instead and rolled off. Loki met the remaining pair with his sword and knife and found them poor swordsmen afoot and left them both crawling, coughing, away to the roadway edge.

Loki found the sun high now, burning his armour to oven-hot metal, but he pushed the cart forward and ignored the buzzing arrows as he would ignore a gnat swarm, brushing them off, pushing forward. A straggling trio, smelling of sour grease and poorly cured hides and smeared with yellow stripes of face paint came up the highway side and he spun at them and his helmet rang beneath the blows and one sliced the rivets holding the visor so that it hung awry, but he beat them down and drove them off and pushed forward.

His strength was beginning to go. Something that felt like a hot hammer blow struck his leg and Loki saw that a short arrow jutted from his thigh. But he could walk. He ripped a canvas waterbottle cover with his knife and bound it around the leg after snapping off the wooden shaft, and pushed forward. The cart seemed to be getting heavier. Loki laughed, though the sound of his voice surprised him that it sounded like a crow's calling. Maybe the cart was too covered with arrows, and that made it seem heavy. He laughed again. The cart looked like a giant porcupine.

The dry clatter of hooves on concrete behind him, and Loki groaned as he turned to face the horsemen who rode on the highway. They knew his arrows were gone, so they came in close, just twenty yards away. Loki leaned against his cart and waited.

"Where are your long arrows, warrior?" one taunted.

"I've a long sword waiting here, crow, that will send you back to carrion picking!"

"We'll kill you now," said a tall one, matter-of-factly. Loki marked him. He rode a white horse and carried a lance and must be some leader or officer.

Loki was too heavy with fatigue to care much. His head swam, but Loki was a traveller and so he answered, "You've been trying that since last night. And I'm the only one who seems to be getting any practise. Is there anyone left in your village, or will you send the women now?"

The tall one wore no paint, so it was easy to see the scowl on his face. Loki guessed they were ready to come. He picked up a spear, where some horseman had dropped it, noted there were two more beneath the cart and took those as well.

It didn't throw as well as his own well-balanced javelins would have, but it threw well enough. It sent their mounts rearing up when it grazed the white horse, and gave him time to plant a second spear solidly in a rearing black animal that whirled, exploding the group. The tall man yelled and the three left lunged forward, and Loki held the last spear and then threw it at the man on the right at point blank range. The man somersaulted backwards over his mount's rump. The two horses reared up around his cart and the swords flashed down and Loki darted between them with the black sword up, but a blade came down from behind and smashed into his helmet and he fell. He rolled and staggered up, thrust, caught another blade in his sword hilt and twisted and the man's long sword snapped like glass.

Loki couldn't see, blood from a forehead cut right through his helmet, blinded his eyes, and he fell. He sobbed with the urgency of wiping it away, but he couldn't get up. Almost. His searching hand found the cart handle and he pulled himself up and began to push through the red mist. It was quiet. He mopped the red from his eyes and fell again, and pulled himself up again. His knife was gone. But he had his sword. He sang the song of the Hawkpeople and made his mouth grin and pushed with one hand and waved his sword over his head with an arm that seemed made of lead.

They didn't strike him down. He could see the tall man on the blue painted white horse. The man stood at the roadside watching him. They lined up along the roadsides. A gauntlet of riders, but they made no sound. It was quiet and the two lines of horsemen merely stood, their mounts shifting uneasily in the hot quiet, as Loki pushed his cart between them down the roadway toward the distant hills. He sang his song and waved his sword high and they sat on their horses and watched him fade to a weaving dot in the desert haze, that sometimes halted and fell, then rose again and pushed on, singing.

Loki's water was going. He could think clearly enough to know that. And he knew he could stand no more fighting. He was drinking too much water. That was the main problem. Probably because of the arrow in his leg. He tried to push it out, but it was barbed and he fainted. That was a womanish thing to do, he remembered, but he was past feeling shame at it.

His head hurt, too. He tore off the broken helmet visor and threw it beside the rising roadway, and realized he was moving

up into the hills. He could have abandoned the cart, he supposed, but without it he could no longer stand erect and so he and the cart were one, a kind of two-legged, three-wheeled beast. He chuckled at the thought. Then he saw Karen walking ahead of him. He called to her and she smiled back, but he could never quite reach her, even though sometimes she was just ahead of the cart.

He poured water from the last bottle over his head and Karen disappeared and there was nothing but the highway again. An endless highway winding up into the hills. But it wasn't endless. There were two blackstone pillars, framing the roadway ahead, and he fished the map from his breastplate, trying to quiet the shaking of his hands so that he could see the smeared legends on it. The cloth was sweatstained and greasy with campsmoke, but it showed the two black pillars and they marked the end of the road. He pushed harder, and fell with the sudden pain in his leg, but he got up again, and rolled the cart forward to the pillars. He topped the rise on which they stood, smiling with anticipation—expecting something, he couldn't imagine what—perhaps a green oasis land of water and forest and waiting people.

He stood there at the hill crest between the black pillars and Loki struggled to focus his aching eyes on the valley before him, because it wasn't green. It was brown, sere as the desert behind him, and without any feature save the highway that wound down into it and made a gentle curve to the south, stretched away as unbroken as it had always been. He lowered himself carefully beneath the cart into its shade and opened the map again. He must think carefully and that was hard to do. He found it again on the map. It was unmistakable. There was a legend beside the pillars as they were shown on the map. It said, "Journey's End."

From the shade beneath the cart he peered back along the highway, down the slope up which he'd staggered with his vehicle. There was a minute trace of movement, a fleck of motion, that coalesced into a hairline winding from the highway. The horsemen, who must have camped after he'd walked through their ranks. Now they were gone and Loki listened to the hot wind pry at the fastening of the cart above him. He chuckled. It hurt his cracked lips and that made it seem even funnier, and he laughed. The more he thought of it, the harder he laughed. The tears streamed across the dust on

his face and his throat was raw and still he could not stop laughing. He thought of the years of training, the fighting, the scheming, that had brought him to a waterless range of desert hills to die. A lifetime's training to get him here. It was certainly the most colossal, gigantic, long-time practical joke ever played, and he laughed the harder.

He was finished. He had no strength left. He had no water. Just to be sure he pulled himself up by the cart handlebar and shook each of the waterbottles, but there was none.

Loki laughed, but a lifetime's training, even a short lifetime of seventeen years, forced him to put his hands on the cart handles again. Against the pain in his swollen leg, he took a step, and the cart creaked forward. Another step, leaning heavily on the handles, and the cart was moving again. The slope was gentle, or he couldn't have held the cart back, but he hung across the handlebar and shoved it before him and slowly descended into the valley.

It was no surprise to see Baron waiting beside the road in this empty place. Baron waited, hands at his side, and Loki would like to have killed him for grinning, but he couldn't lift his sword any more. When the cart drew beside him, Baron's smile grew wider.

"Well, you took long enough. Get on that odd-looking cart and I'll push it for a while."

"Where's Karen," Loki croaked.

"Waiting," Baron said, and lifted Loki bodily into the cart and Loki wondered at the strength of the tall, thin looking man. "She needed time to get ready. She's a very young woman, you know. She's been waiting, but at her age, she doesn't like you to see her cry."

Loki resented the reference to age. He was old enough to get here and he was seventeen. But he was too tired to argue and it was good just to lie looking up at the sky and feel the cart bump beneath him.

"Where now?" he asked finally.

"To the trail end. I'd have come sooner, but they watched you too closely. They must have given you up for dead when the horse riders attacked. Now they'll find another traveller to follow."

Loki digested that in quiet, then, "Who are they?"

Baron's voice was lighter, as though each step took them from danger. "The other ones, from over the ocean. They

seek to destroy us, we destroy them. Man always fights. In two days, we'll be home," he added. "We're building a new civilization. The travellers are the selected ones who come to us."

Loki swore and muttered something about new civilizations.

Baron merely kept talking. "It's not easy to rebuild. Think of the technology required to create materials for something as simple as a vacuum tube. We must create a metals industry, electrical and electronics equipment. We found a large supply of solid masers, and created the weapon you saw. We're printing books, have schools and a university. We're creating drugs and vaccines. We'll grow strong and wise. They're doing the same. Maybe someday we'll be wise enough to stop this war."

Baron thought a moment. "But I wonder if we really will. We talk always of the horror of war. But we always fight. As if there were a built-in check—as with the lemmings. And each time we emerge we are somehow higher up the scale of life."

"Brant was one of them." Loki threw in.

"The steam-car man? Yes. He'd been following you. Others, too, in flying machines. They were the really dangerous ones."

The cart was moving more quickly. A knot of men stepped from a recess in the hillside above and moved toward the cart. "Here comes the Doctor." Baron said.

"Why did you steal Karen?" Loki demanded.

"Too good to lose," Baron stated flatly. "Not many women have been fighting their way through. We needed her. Even more than you. We created the law, so we abrogated it."

"Stop the cart," Loki demanded. "Help me down." Baron said nothing, but he helped Loki to stand behind the cart. "All right," Loki said. "Now, by the little laughing gods, let's go on. I'll march in. I'm a warrior. I'm a traveller. Let's travel."

They moved on down the valley. The tall man pushing the cart, a proud-looking youth who leaned heavily against the cart, but limped on his own legs and wore a broken helmet. Behind them, a knot of armed men who watched the way ahead and behind and above with calculating, fighters' eyes. The little cavalcade wound over the next hill and disappeared from view.

—K. W. Bennett

This month's meeting of the Midnight Club produces an interesting vignette on a topical subject—the Budget and a leak in its secrets.

HOLE IN THE DYKE

BY STEVE HALL

There was an extra member of the Midnight Club when they assembled for their autumn meeting. Dr. Kemp, the speaker at an earlier function, had since been inducted as one of the clan, and had also made a promising start to a literary career having written and sold six fantasy stories in as many months. He was talking animatedly to the others at his table, as the dinner, which had been of the superb standard now accepted as normal by the participants, drew towards the stage when coffee, liqueurs and cigarettes were beginning to appear all around the room.

A full complement of earlier members of the club was present, attracted as usual by the thought of a pleasant evening in congenial company, a good meal, and to round it off, an intriguing narrative by the guest speaker. Once again, the President had managed to titillate their anticipation of this by the wording of his quarterly newsletter. From what he had written, it appeared that tonight's speaker would be something of a mystery as a person, due to the fact that he would be there incognito. The President had, of course, given no hint as to

why this was the case, being wise enough to know that what he had left unsaid would provide an even greater lure than a full statement.

Outside, the air at five minutes to midnight, had become distinctly chilly, heralding and warning of the winter months ahead. But inside, the twin fireplaces at the ends of the room blazed cheerfully and effectively with crackling, flaring logs contained in massive, wrought-iron firebaskets.

The head waiter directed the serving of the last few drinks, the placing of an additional log or two in position, then glanced towards the President. After receiving a satisfied nod from the dignified and distinguished-looking writer, he signalled his staff to withdraw and followed them out, closing the double, ebony and gilt doors behind him.

All heads and eyes were turned towards the centre table when the hands of the ornate, mantel clock at one end of the room pointed vertically upwards and the first of its twelve chimes was the only sound to be heard. The authors present had different thoughts coursing through their minds. Some were wondering just *what* words would be chosen by their President to open the proceedings (they were always different); others were concerned to know *who* the guest was; yet another section was more intrigued with *what* he would have to say. All speculations were about to be dealt with.

Vance Seaton rose to address them, smoothing one hand over his silvering hair and glancing at a card of notes.

"Fellow literary lions," an appreciative titter at his sally rippled around the tables, "our guest tonight is unusual indeed. All of you will know from my letter that he is here strictly incognito, so you will not be surprised if I inform you that for tonight, his name is 'Mr. Smith.' In addition to this, his very appearance is not his own. If you were to meet him in the street after tonight, you would not recognise him, and that is as it should be.

"Why, you may ask, should we have a person present who is almost a wholly fictional character? There are good and sufficient reasons for this procedure and to outline them to you I call upon our guest of honour, 'Mr. Smith'."

It was not difficult to understand why the applause which followed was more restrained and cautious than usual, preceded as it had been by the almost melodramatic, cloak-and-dagger introduction.

Twenty-five pairs of eyes appraised the man who was appearing for a one-night stand only. Behind each pair of eyes a keen and inventive brain pondered over what was true and what might be false about the man getting to his feet before them—a man who exuded ordinariness from every square inch—was it the dull, mousey-brown hair; the thin-lensed, blue-tinted spectacles, which shadowed and concealed his eyes; or the nondescript little moustache; or perhaps his clothing was padded to make a slighter figure seem more medium in build than in reality? It was impossible to be sure or even reasonably suspicious about any one detail. If the man was disguised, it had been designed and completed by a master.

'Smith's' face was absolutely dead-pan when he stood up and began speaking, staring at a point in mid-air about three feet above the heads of his nearest listeners. He also neglected the usual formal opening.

"There are aliens among us." A pause to let the bombshell reach its targets, then he hurried on before it could provoke an unwanted discussion. "You people are prone to use this word very often, but what meaning does the dictionary assign to it? I took the trouble to look at one before coming here tonight, and would like to read the exact definition quoted: '*alien*, a. foreign; of a different nature. n. one who is of another race.'

"You will appreciate from this, I know, that while the word is used almost exclusively in fantasy fiction to denote some being from another world, this is not its only meaning. And it is with its other meaning that I am concerned tonight, I mean the definition which says: 'of a different nature'."

My story begins ('Smith' said) some years ago. I had entered Government service earlier, in the usual way, by sitting and passing the Civil Service examinations. Over the years which followed, I passed through several departments, ending up in one which has no name because it is concerned with special, varied and mostly secret duties.

For some time before being seconded to the special department, I had been partly aware of a peculiar aptitude which I possessed: I seemed to have the ability to *know* when a person was speaking the truth to me! If this should seem an almost all-powerful talent to you, do not be misled. If an answer to a question is of the yes-no variety and you are given an answer which you know to be false, then obviously the other alternative is the correct one. But if a question has several answers, and

you are given one which is untrue, that does not tell you which of the many others is correct. Most of the situations in life are of the second variety so my special talent has only limited applications. Nevertheless, it was considered important enough to use me on selected occasions, usually with a fair degree of success.

Sometimes I was a 'secretary' accompanying a member of the Government at some conference; other times I was an 'interpreter,' or I might be called an 'expert' or an 'advisor'—it varied according to the requirements.

How the ability works, I cannot say with certainty. In my own opinion, however, it is empathetic in character. There were many times too, when it got me into hot water—it is all too easy to contradict someone flatly when you know you have been told a lie. Again, what woman would be pleased if she thought that her husband knew whether her every statement was true or false? Gradually I have learned discretion, and am appropriately, 'in the dark,' if it is wiser to be that way with my wife or anyone else not 'in the know.'

Some years ago; just how many I won't say, but it's not too hard to work out; there was an unfortunate leak of Budget information before the Chancellor had actually presented his secrets to the House. The P.M. was particularly anxious that nothing similar should happen again, and so, partly because I had some Treasury experience and partly due to my extra talent, I was detailed to spend the couple of weeks before the great day giving the Chancellor a hand with the minor parts of his task, and also to keep an eye open for any peculiar characters who might be hanging around looking for an opportunity to pull a fast one.

Now I'm not sure if you know exactly how the Budget is put together, and I won't be betraying any secrets if I tell you. Informations, facts and figures, trends and so on are provided by the permanent Treasury officials, but the actual proposals put before Parliament come from the Boss himself. He bases them on current Government policies and the needs of the present and the immediate future as he sees them.

Something like ten days before the big day, Hugh Trevellian (as I will call the Chancellor) sent me to the Treasury for the last lot of information which he wanted. Carrying a bulging brief-case of statistics, I accompanied him to the car which was to take us into the country for the last week's preparatory work.

Nothing untoward happened during the journey, and we discussed everything under the sun on the way down.

The final week was hard going for the whole time. Every day the routine was the same; after breakfast we would join forces in the big study, Trevellian would have his desk of papers at one side and I would be at the other. If he wanted anything from me, he would come across the room to my desk and say: "Let me have last year's figures for Income Tax Revenue, would you, Smith?" That way, I was prevented from being near enough to his papers to see anything that I shouldn't.

When lunch-time came, he would gather up all his stuff and stow it away in the wall-safe, locking it himself. Afterwards, he reversed the procedure and opened the safe—only he could anyway, because as far as I knew, he was the only one with the combination.

In the evening, when dinner was over, the Chancellor liked a game of billiards before settling down with a book and a pot of coffee in the lounge. He wasn't too late a bird, always retiring for the night by twelve o'clock.

The week passed by, and on the final Saturday morning by about eleven I had finished my work when Elsa Dunning knocked at the door and entered with a tray of tea and biscuits. She was the old man's private secretary and had been with him since he had been a Back-bencher.

Trevellian turned all his papers face downwards, got up from his desk and walked over to the coffee table in the centre of the room.

"Put it down here, my dear, I'll pour."

I handed around the biscuits.

"Can I have the remainder of your notes for typing?" Elsa asked the Chancellor.

"No, I don't think we'll bother transcribing those," he replied. "It's only a page or so and they're complete enough to be put away. I'll lock them in the safe when we've finished our elevenses." He dunked a ginger-snap thoughtfully in his tea. "How are you fixed, Smith—anything left of any great consequence?"

"No, sir," I replied. "As a matter of fact everything you wanted me to prepare is ready."

"Good," he said, "then that's it for this year. Perhaps you two would like to take the rest of the day off—you could probably do with a break."

I turned to Elsa for a moment. "Would you like to have a walk around the grounds after lunch?"

She took off the spectacles she used for working; her eyes were brown and very attractive—I was hoping she would say 'yes.'

"I'd love to," she said candidly, and I *knew*, without fooling myself, that she was telling the truth.

"Right," said Trevellian his eyes twinkling a little, "I'll put your supplementary figures and my speech in the safe, and we'll be off."

Elsa and I spent a pleasant two hours or so strolling in the lovely grounds then in the early stages of their spring finery, and the time until dinner passed quickly. That night, it was to be a formal affair, and a cabaret had been laid on. Also, some members of the Government and their ladies had been invited for the weekend.

I donned my dinner jacket and met Elsa in the lounge for cocktails. She was wearing a dress in pale blue and looked very lovely. Needless to say, during the meal I gave very little of my attention to any of the other guests.

Around 9 p.m. we all trooped into the lounge again which had now been laid out for the cabaret. The chairs were arranged in a rough semi-circle over two thirds of the room, the remaining area being left clear for the performers.

The first act was a wellknown comedian who soon got the party chuckling at his distinctive style of humour. Next came a glamorous, female ballad singer, who acquitted herself well. Finally, Svengali was announced. That's not his real name, but it will do for now.

All the V.I.P.'s and their wives were sitting in the front rows of chairs, grading towards the back of the room according to status. This set-up put Elsa and I, of course, in the very last row, which suited me admirably.

Svengali didn't look at all like his fictional namesake. He was quite short and dapper with a quiff of greying hair above a face that could smile persuasively.

Neither Elsa nor I were particularly keen on this type of act once we realised what it was, so we didn't pay a great deal of attention to it. We were vaguely conscious that the artiste himself was wandering around the front rows getting famous figures or their wives to come forward from time to time and participate in the intimate type of entertainment in which he

specialised, and we only came out of our personal, conversational reverie when a burst of clapping made it clear that he had finished. Shortly afterwards, the chairs were cleared away and the dancing began and continued for the remainder of the evening.

Sunday passed with the Chancellor taking it easy—Elsa and I continued becoming more closely acquainted.

On the Monday, we all returned to London, and Trevellian spent most of the day with his papers, completely alone in his study. We didn't need any great encouragement to spend some more time in each other's company, but I kept a weather eye open all the same for any funny business, although there wasn't much chance of that at Number Eleven. However, everything remained quiet and the day passed without incident, the Chancellor retiring quite early at 10 p.m.

The next morning, both of us watched him take his papers from the safe and put them into the famous, old despatch-box. When he had closed the battered lid on its contents and walked through the front door to pose for the usual photographs, we felt a good deal of relief—from now on he was in someone else's hands and very little could happen—it was too late to profit from any of the secrets which could be common knowledge in a few hours.

Elsa and I spent the day out, and a wonderful day it was, we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, which was just as well with what followed later. We heard what Trevellian had to say in the House, from a portable radio while we sat in the Embankment gardens that afternoon, and I felt a mixture of happiness that my immediate job was over, coupled with regret that I would now see less of Elsa.

When we returned to Downing Street, however, we were soon disillusioned. Trevellian, looking grim-faced, was waiting there with a Treasury security type, whose face looked more like a carved mask than flesh and blood. The Chancellor motioned us into a room and spoke bluntly in a neutral tone of voice.

"Maybe this will be news to you and maybe it won't, but there's been another leak."

Frozenly, I noticed that regardless of whether the statement was true or not, *he* believed it to be true.

"This matter will never become public knowledge," went on Trevellian, "as it concerns the movement of money into and out of the country, manipulations which can only be carried out by certain people. Such a transaction involving a very large sum, was completed yesterday, which could have been intelligent anticipation or a leak of information. Its nature was such that the second alternative is virtually a certainty."

He looked at us bleakly before continuing.

"Both your careers," nodding to Elsa and me, "and mine are at an end, unless we can solve the mystery of how the information was obtained."

"That's hardly fair, surely," I burst out. "I thought there was a little clause in British Justice about being innocent until proved guilty."

Trevellian smiled sadly. "In this case, only the three of us were anywhere near the papers concerned, so we appear to be the only suspects who could have done it. I know that I haven't mentioned the proposal to a soul other than the P.M., and no doubt you will both say that you couldn't have done it, so where does that get us?"

Again, I knew that he was telling the truth, so all that remained was the P.M., who could be ruled out, leaving only Elsa and myself. I thought it over swiftly: I hadn't blabbed, so it had to be Elsa, but I just couldn't believe it.

"You'll hate me for this," I said, turning to face her, "but I have to ask it—did you or did you not have anything to do with the leak?"

"I didn't," she replied flatly, looking definite and a little disappointed at one and the same time.

"Bless you," I said, as another true answer was rung up on my mental score-chart.

All three of them; Elsa, Trevellian, and mask-face looked astonished at my outburst. Before they could recover, I hammered on. Turning to face the Chancellor, I said: "When exactly did you finalise the particular proposal concerned, can you remember?"

He nodded immediately and emphatically. Mask-face did not intervene although I'm sure he wanted to.

"That's easy, it was not a difficult item to settle. I had considered it during the week, and actually completed the calculation and embodied it in my proposals on Saturday morning. It only became final just before we had our morning tea together."

"So it could only have been appropriated between then and Monday morning," I stated, "within a period of forty-eight hours—after that it would have been too late, correct?"

Hugh Trevellian nodded. "Go on, my boy."

"You put the papers in the safe before we left you on Saturday morning, we both saw you," I turned to Elsa for confirmation.

"That's right," she murmured thoughtfully.

"And as far as I know, they stayed there until we both saw you take them out prior to returning to London on Monday?"

"Correct again," confirmed the Chancellor. "Now where do we go?"

"Would you then agree, sir, that the information was in two places only—in the safe, and in your mind? Neither Elsa nor I knew them or the combination of the safe, did we?"

"You're right, perfectly right," said Trevellian, his face greying a little. "So what you're saying is that somehow or other I've betrayed the information?"

"Yes," I replied, "but unwittingly."

"I'll never believe that," Elsa said moving a little farther away from me.

Mask-face chipped in for the first time. "Are you saying that the Chancellor was tricked into revealing the information, *without knowing it*?"

"What else is left," I demanded. "Use Occam's Razor. Now let's find out how it was done. What did you do on Sunday, sir?"

His face puckered in thought, a tiny triangle of lines forming above the bridge of his nose.

"After breakfast I outlined the main points of my proposals to the P.M. We were absolutely alone the whole time."

"And after lunch?"

"I went for a stroll, again I saw no-one. Then there was dinner, our game of billiards and bed."

"So we're left with Saturday afternoon and evening," I said. "What of them?"

"After lunch I felt somewhat sleepy," said Trevellian, "so I went to bed."

"Could you have spoken in your sleep and been overheard?" I queried.

"No," he responded a little shamefacedly. "You see I locked the door behind me, and you know how thick they are

—even if I had spoken, I couldn't have been heard unless I'd been shouting at the top of my voice."

"Why did you lock the door?"

He looked even more uncomfortable. "I snore in my sleep, and I didn't want anyone opening the door accidentally and hearing me—one isn't proud of such traits you know."

"That seems to clinch it at Saturday evening then, and if we forget dinner, we're left with the cabaret and the dancing. Let's start with the entertainment. Neither the comedian or the singer spoke directly to anyone did they?"

"Only afterwards," Trevellian responded. "All of the performers were introduced to the P.M., and he said a few words to them, I was there when he spoke and there was nothing said that was remotely connected with the Budget."

"What about Svengali's act—did he speak to you?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact I took part in one of his demonstrations."

"What did he say exactly? Try to remember."

Once more the little triangle appeared on the Chancellor's forehead.

"He came to me third or fourth, I can't remember which exactly, and said: 'Would you help me with a little mind reading, sir? I promise not to steal any of your Budget secrets,' it got quite a laugh at the time."

"Could we have a few moments alone?" I asked suddenly.

Mask-face looked upset at this, but grudgingly escorted Elsa out when Trevellian assured him that it would be all right.

I managed to convince the Chancellor that I knew of the way in which the stunt had been pulled and he let me make a phone call to my chief.

The boys roped in Svengali in one hour flat—he was playing in cabaret in town—and brought him to Downing Street.

It wasn't too difficult for me to break him down and make him admit that he *really* could read minds. Admitted it was effective over only a few yards, and he had to use some effort, just as you would when trying to listen in on a conversation, but it was good enough for his act. He had the perfect setup, the secret of how it was done couldn't be found out. There was no faked apparatus and no trickery—for him, it worked.

Svengali was already in contact with the Chancellor's mind telepathically when he made the crack about not stealing any

secrets, so that he couldn't help being aware of what came up when he made his remark to Trevellian. The mentallist went away from the cabaret that night in as much of a jitter as if he'd rifled the safe. He couldn't get the Budget proposals out of his mind, and like a fool, tried to drink himself into forgetfulness—it didn't work, and he babbled it all in front of a couple of lads who could make good use of it in the bar of a nightclub.

'Smith' stopped speaking for a moment and brought his eyes down from the invisible, mid-air spot upon which he had kept them previously.

"Svengali stopped appearing in cabarets after that and was shanghied into Government service. I think that he was glad to have his secret known to others, if only a few. And he seemed to regard me almost as a brother, because, in the same way that he was alien, 'of a different nature' from the rest of humanity, so was I. He died in a car accident a few months ago.

"Now the point of my story is this: we found a true telepath in this country and we need others, for all we know they exist elsewhere in the world and they will certainly be used, possibly against us. What you have heard tonight is semi-secret, most people would disbelieve it, I hope that you will not."

The blue-lensed spectacles swept slowly over each face there, and 'Smith' spoke for the last time.

"I have been authorised to release this information in places where it might be useful and bring us some return—we *must do so*. You authors of fantasy fiction must give ideas of 'wild talents' some credence, more so than most people, so I would ask you to keep it to yourself but let your President know if you think you have spotted one. *Don't attempt to deal with it yourself, please.*"

'Smith' bowed slightly to his audience, shook hands with Vance Seaton, and left as a buzz of speculation was beginning.

The President rose to his feet with a slight smile on his face.

"One thing more, 'Smith' omitted to tell you that he married Elsa Dunning, but since the rest of the story is fiction, that doesn't matter, does it?"

"I would appreciate it though, if you did let me know about any 'wild-talents' you come across." Which left them all in a bigger quandary than ever, as he refused to say another word on the subject.

—Steve Hall

Tom Crandle was on trial for murder, but his twin brother Ian, who shared his mind, would be the one to suffer if Tom died.

The Mind of Young Crandle

BY HUGH CHRISTOPHER

Doctor Gilbert Magnus was profoundly shocked when he heard that Tom Crandle had been arrested for murder. He had locked the front door after evening surgery when his wife appeared in the room.

"Mr. Crandle is in the lounge waiting to see you," she said. "He says it's very important and he didn't want to be seen in the surgery."

Stopping only to light his first pipe of the evening, Dr. Magnus went to the lounge wondering what could be important enough to bring Sam Crandle out on a wild November night.

"The police came an hour ago and arrested my son for the Leith Walk murder," Sam Crandle said in a slightly tremulous voice.

"Which one?"

"Tom," replied Crandle, "he was awake at the time."

Dr. Magnus sank into a chair momentarily speechless as he stared at the older man.

He had known the Crandles for twenty years. Soon after commencing practice in Edinburgh he was called to the Crandle's neat stone bungalow in the Corstorphine district. Mrs. Crandle was worried by the odd behaviour of her identical twin boys, then five weeks old.

"They're never awake at the same time, doctor," she told him. "If Tom is awake then Ian sleeps, and it's not an ordinary sleep, either."

Dr. Magnus examined both babies. Tom was awake and appeared perfectly normal and contented. The other baby was obviously in a very deep sleep and did not respond to the doctor's efforts to awaken him."

"He won't wake until Tom's asleep," said Mrs. Crandle, "and to tell you the truth, doctor, it's wearing my husband and I out."

"Don't worry now, it will probably pass. In any case I'll arrange for Mr. McIver, the child specialist at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary to come and see them."

The examination was fixed for the following Thursday. Dr. Magnus met McIver the next day on the steps leading to Waverley Station.

"I can't stop just now, doctor, I'll have a report ready by tomorrow on the twins."

As he turned to continue his hurried descent McIver shouted to Dr. Magnus.

"I'll tell you one thing, though. Those twins aren't just asleep."

Dr. Magnus read the report next morning before surgery. He was disappointed. Mr. McIver had no explanation for the sleeping behaviour of the Crandle twins. He had witnessed the babies in the act of changing roles—one falling asleep while the other awoke. Ian was perfectly normal. Tom was in the deep sleep when McIver examined him. 'Breathing shallow,' 'temperature low,' 'physically inert,' he wrote in this part of the report. 'I would say that the twins, perhaps because they are identical, depend on each other for certain functions. Just as Siamese twins are joined physically so these twins are joined on the mental plane but in a manner I cannot begin to explain.' He advised the parents to employ professional assistance in looking after the children at least during their babyhood.

Sam Crandle was the manager of one of the biggest bookshops in Edinburgh and could afford to hire Mary Glen, S.R.N. a fine Scots nurse with much experience in raising children. Soon the Crandle household became accustomed to their strange twins and resumed a more or less normal routine. Nurse Glen took charge of the situation as if she had never

dealt with any other kind of children. She relieved Mrs. Crandle of some of the burden of nursing and gave the twins every attention they required. The Crandles had never made many close friends in Edinburgh and this now proved advantageous. They were not troubled by visits from kindly neighbours either, since they had only recently moved to the Corstorphine area. The babies thrived.

When the twins began to talk Dr. Magnus was called in again.

"There's nothing wrong with them, doctor," Sam Crandle said on the telephone, "but there's something strange going on and I would like to discuss it with you."

It appeared that if the Crandles taught one child a few verses of a nursery rhyme then the other when he awoke was perfectly familiar with it. The same was true, they said, of simple skills like building blocks or handling a spoon. If one child learned how to manage them, then the other, although asleep, seemed to have reached the same stage automatically. Dr. Magnus was incredulous. But Nurse Glen, practical and down to earth, confirmed that it was true.

Again Dr. Magnus consulted McIver. After conducting some fool-proof tests the child specialist was also convinced. They met in his office in the Royal Infirmary.

"What do you think is going on?" asked Dr. Magnus.

Mr. McIver pondered a moment while lighting a cigarette.

"The situation is quite unique in my experience," he said. "The Crandle twins are using the same mind alternately. Whichever one is awake is in possession of it during his waking hours. When he goes to sleep the other takes over, in other words, the mind is always awake, only the bodies require rest and refreshment. That is why the sleeping twin exhibits such lifeless qualities. The body is merely ticking over, barely alive. The mind has transferred to the waking twin."

"And how do you account for it, Mr. McIver?"

"Who can say?" replied the specialist. "Who knows what tricks such an unknown faculty as the mind will play? But, that one mind should pervade two human bodies is quite extraordinary."

"What advice am I, the family doctor, to give to the Crandles?"

"I don't know enough about possible developments to help you there," answered McIver. "But, in general, I feel

that the twins should be treated as naturally as possible. They are, after all, human beings. Why don't you write to the *Journal* and find out if anyone else in the field has had experience of this nature."

Dr. Magnus did indeed write to the *Journal* of the B.M.A. So thoroughly, however, had he to cloak his article on the case (to preserve the anonymity of himself and the Crandles) that all the Editor received was angry letters from busy doctors to keep such nonsense out of a learned periodical.

Thrown back on his own resources Dr. Magnus helped the Crandles with commonsense advice. They were reasonable people and cared for their children as any parents would. The boys proved to be very intelligent and neither saw anything odd in the fact that his identical brother was always asleep. When it came time to send them to school Sam Crandle discussed with Dr. Magnus the possibility of pretending that only one child was enrolled.

"Few people know that there are twins. They have never been seen together and since they share the same mind and are identical, no one need know that two separate children are involved."

Dr. Magnus, however, was against the plan. He thought it unfair to the boys to do anything that would make them feel the peculiarities of their situation. So a few education officials and the headmaster of the school were taken into their confidence and it was arranged that both should attend. They shared the morning and afternoon sessions. Tom attended morning classes and learned, perhaps, multiplication tables. At lunch time he rested and slept, and in the afternoon Ian arrived at school knowing the morning lessons as if he had been there.

The other pupils knew nothing of the exchange and since both boys were referred to as 'Crandle' there was no difficulty over names. They enjoyed their schooldays and made friends without trouble. Dr. Magnus occasionally spoke to them about their own relationship.

"You're Tom, aren't you?"

"Ian, doctor. Tom's asleep."

"Don't you ever want to talk to him, Ian?"

"I don't have to, doctor. I know what he would say."

"Do you ever leave a message for him? A letter?"

"That would be writing to myself, doctor." And off he would go laughing at the thought.

From time to time Dr. Magnus also tested the boys. His object was to discover any sign of differences in the personality, memory, or intelligence of the twins. He always hoped at the back of his mind that one day a split would occur and both twins could lead normal lives. His hopes were raised once when Sam Crandle showed him the boy's school report cards.

"But this is wonderful, Sam. Don't you see? Tom has scored higher marks than Ian in all subjects. This could be the beginning of a split."

"Oh, no, doctor, that's easily explained," laughed Mr. Crandle. "You see, they naturally had to sit the exams on different days so Tom had more time for last minute study. And believe it or not, doctor, he used to sit up late doing just that."

Dr. Magnus' face reflected his disappointment.

When he was twelve years old Tom was caught stealing apples from a nearby orchard. He was summonsed to appear before the juvenile Court. On the morning the case was to be heard it happened that Ian was awake so Sam Crandle took him along to the court. Ian answered to Tom's name and readily admitted the theft. He was fined five shillings which his father paid immediately. Later telling Dr. Magnus of the incident, Ian said, "But I had to admit I took them. I knew all about it!"

"But it was Tom who stole them, Ian. Don't you know that?"

"It didn't matter. I knew about it, doctor."

Dr. Magnus went to see his father.

"I don't think it was avoidable on this occasion, Sam, but in future, I think you should let each boy be responsible for his own actions."

"There was no harm in it, doctor. Besides, Tom was asleep when he should have been in court."

The boys left school a few years later and went to work in their father's bookshop. They were efficient and able at the job and developed into fine young men. As far as the customers and the rest of the staff were concerned there was only one youth, 'Young Crandle.' They made many friends, mainly among students of the University near the bookshop. They even took girls out from time to time. Dr. Magnus was worried when he learned of this. He and his wife met Ian one evening in the bar of a smart city restaurant.

"Hello, young Crandle. Didn't expect to find you here. How are you? You're becoming quite the man about town."

"I'm—waiting for someone, doctor."

"A girl, perhaps?" laughed Mrs. Magnus.

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Well, well! Nothing serious, I hope."

"No, nothing serious."

"How about your brother?"

"Oh, he goes out with her too."

"Does she know?"

"No."

"What does she call each of you, then?"

"Well, actually, she calls me 'The handsome bookseller of Low Street,' or more often 'Ian.' It doesn't really matter."

"Well, have a nice evening, young man. Goodnight!"

In the car on the way home Mrs. Magnus said, "Suppose those boys ever want to marry, Gil?"

"I've thought about that often. I don't see how they could."

"But they're so normal! Can't anything be done about them?"

"You mean wake up the sleeping twin?"

"Yes."

"I tried everything I know to do it. So has McIver. I think I've read everything with the remotest bearing on this case. Nothing has come of it. Besides, it could be dangerous. We just don't know what might happen if we did wake one up. Whose mind would he have? Also we don't know what would happen if one of them died. Suppose there was an accident and one was run over? What would happen? I think of these things often but I can't help them."

"Well, never mind, Gil, you've brought them along this far. Perhaps one day something will happen to solve it."

Dr. Magnus roused himself. He had no idea how long he had been sitting in the chair.

"What happened?" he asked in a low voice.

"On Friday night a man called Henry Summers was shot in Leith Walk. He was taken to the Royal Infirmary and died next day. The police say that before he died he named 'Young Crandle' as his attacker."

"What did Tom say?"

"I told him to say nothing and they took him away."

"Did you tell the police about Ian being an identical twin?"

"No. Nothing."

"Good! We may be able to use that in defence. Do you realise, Sam, that it could have been either of them?"

"Yes."

"Do you know which of them was out that night?"

"No. My wife and I stopped taking note of which one was awake. We treated them as one."

Tom Crandle was duly charged with the capital murder of Henry Summers, a bookmaker, and confined in Saughton Prison. Through a solicitor, Mr. Crandle obtained the services of F. C. Quincy, Q.C., a notable trial lawyer for the defence. Dr. Magnus was permitted to attend at an interview the lawyer and solicitor had with Tom Crandle in prison.

"Now Tom, you do realise the seriousness of your position? If I am to defend you properly, you must tell me the truth and only the truth. Do you know anything about the death of Henry Summers?"

"Yes."

The lawyer breathed a sigh of relief.

"I am glad you're being honest with me, Tom. I can tell you now that the police have eye-witnesses to place you in Leith Walk on November 20th, and in fact have an eye-witness to the shooting who recognised you."

"Then ask him whose fault it was!" Tom exclaimed angrily.

"Right, Tom, you tell me, whose fault was it?"

Step by step Quincy took Tom through the events of that night. Slowly he produced enough material to present a case of self-defence.

"Fine. Let me go over it again. This man approached you for money you owed him. He was drunk. You told him you would have to ask your father for it. He wouldn't let you pass. Suddenly Summers produced a gun. You both struggled for it. During the struggle Summers fell. You panicked and ran away. Anything else, Tom?"

"No. That's how it happened."

Dr. Magnus remained quiet. He did not think it necessary to bring Ian in at this stage.

Trial was fixed for early February in the High Court in Edinburgh. Matters went badly for Tom. The Crown witnesses and Summers' death-bed statement made an enormous

impression on the jury. Quincy's defence sounded weak. When the Crown produced evidence that the gun used in the shooting belonged to Sam Crandle, his case fell to pieces. Tom had lied. During an adjournment Dr. Magnus took Sam Crandle aside.

"Listen carefully, Sam. Tom's only chance is to plead for mercy. To do that we must tell Quincy about Ian. We must tell him everything. He can put it to the court that if anything happened to Tom, Ian might also suffer."

"But that would mean revealing everything in open court. The newspapers—" gasped Mr. Crandle.

"It's his only chance, Sam. We must do it for the sake of both of them."

Quincy thought they were joking when they told him. They had to repeat the story over and over again before he was convinced.

"I am a doctor. I give you my word it's true, Mr. Quincy. You can bring in Mr. McIver to back you up if necessary."

Eventually Quincy agreed to reveal the whole story in a last effort to save Tom Crandle.

The court was crowded when the trial re-opened. Word had circulated that Quincy would disclose sensational evidence in his address to the jury.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my client, Thomas Crandle is guilty. He caused the death of Henry Summers. He submits that it happened in self-defence and that he should not be charged with capital murder. I now have to reveal information passed to me recently which may have some bearing on your and the Court's deliberations on the accused. Thomas Crandle has an identical twin brother, Ian. He is at this moment asleep at home. I know this because his brother stands in the dock. These young men depend on each other. They cannot be awake at the same time. More than that, they even share the same mind. Therefore, in the case before this Court, I have to state, however odd it may seem, that two men with one mind, one personality, are being tried for murder. I beg leave, to call as witnesses Mr. James McIver, child specialist at Edinburgh Infirmary, and Ian Crandle, twin brother of the accused."

Mr. McIver gave evidence to the Court that afternoon. He outlined and confirmed the medical history of the twins and the reasons for keeping it as secret as possible until now. Mr. Quincy asked one other question.

"Mr. McIver, if perchance, and I say that advisedly, if Tom Crandle were to hang for the murder of Henry Summers what would be the effect on Ian Crandle?"

"I am quite unable to answer that question with any authority. A number of possibilities exist, however, and I am willing to express an opinion if the Court will allow."

"Proceed."

"First, then, they may both die. Whether the mind could transfer from a dead body I cannot tell. If Ian lived, some permanent damage may be done to his mind and for the rest of his days he may suffer unnecessarily. Also, from the point of view of medical significance the loss of either of them would be tragic. I believe that in these twins we may be witnessing the next stage in the evolutionary process of the human race. I believe that in time, the state we see in these twins may be universal, that they are experimental forerunners of the future."

"I look at it this way. In modern times the human mind is so restless that it finds difficulty in forcing the body to perform all the tasks it wishes to undertake. How often have you said to yourself, 'Oh, if only I weren't so tired, I could do such and such a thing?' We refer to the weariness of the body. The mind is tireless so far as we know. At this stage in evolution the mind can dispense with the body as an unsuitable vehicle or it can experiment with new forms of the human state. I believe that in the Crandle twins we see an attempt to duplicate the human form in an effort to leave the mind awake and free at all times."

The Court adjourned and the newspaper reporters rushed to their telephones.

Arrangements were made the next day for Ian Crandle to appear in Court. Tom was asleep in his cell.

Mr. Quincy cross-examined Ian. After establishing his identity, the lawyer went on,

"If I were to read out the charge against Thomas Crandle and substitute your name for his, how would you plead?"

"Guilty."

"You mean you were there when Henry Summers was shot?"

"I mean that I know all about it in my mind."

The Crown lawyer rose.

"Did you or did you not shoot Henry Summers?"

"I did—I mean, I don't know which of us did," mumbled Ian.

"In other words," said Quincy loudly, catching the attention of the court, "if you had been awake at the time, and the police had arrested and charged you, you would have been in exactly the same position as your brother is today?"

"Yes."

The judge, Lord Milner, brought the hearing to an end for that day to consider the new facets of the case.

In his summing-up on the final day of the trial the judge was careful to present the law as it must be administered before the jury.

"While there is provision in law for a judge and jury to exercise discretion in the case of an accused suffering from a schizophrenic personality, or split-mind, there is none whatsoever when a case of split-bodies is before the court. Thomas Crandle is accused of the capital murder of Henry Summers on the night of November 20th last year. He admits that he caused the death of Summers.

"If you think him guilty of capital murder then you must say so regardless of the fact that he has an identical twin brother, or which one was in possession of their shared mind."

Thomas Crandle was found guilty and Lord Milner pronounced sentence of death at a time and place appointed.

At the moment that his brother died from hanging Ian Crandle awoke shivering. Dr. Gilbert Magnus was present at his bedside.

"Is it all over now?"

"It's all over, Ian. How are you feeling?"

"All right, I think, doctor."

"Well, I am glad to see you alive, Ian. You know that we weren't sure what might happen? Lie still while I examine you."

Later Dr. Magnus said,

"Fine. No damage at all. Climb out and get dressed. I want to put you through some more tests."

These tests Dr. Magnus had designed to gauge Ian's memory, intelligence and other faculties. He scored as he normally would in intelligence but there were undoubtedly large gaps in his memory. For instance, while he could recite perfectly the multiplication tables for 9 and 10, he fumbled his way through those for 11 and 12. Dr. Magnus concluded that Ian had lost the parts of his memory which were acquired by Tom while in

possession of the mind. He told Ian his analysis and said, "You've escaped lightly, Ian. It might have been much worse. You can easily restore your memory. However, I'll tell your parents that you at least are safe."

Dr. Magnus walked to the bedroom door. As he turned the handle he said, "By the way, Ian, do you remember where you were on the night of November 20th last year?"

In the act of lighting a cigarette, Ian stopped, transfixed as memory flooded back.

"I was in Leith Walk and I murdered a man," he whispered.

—Hugh Christopher



British—Hardcover

Many and varied are the events leading up to the publication of an author's first novel, but, with few exceptions, no amateur writer can be expected to produce a powerful *professional* work at his first attempt. He needs writing experience in other fields, especially in the short story market, or newspaper reporting, or editorial work—experiences where he will gain an insight into other peoples' work and the requirements of publishers.

Ray Russell's brilliant first novel, *The Case Against Satan* (Souvenir Press, 16/-) brings to a climax his successful years as former Executive Editor of America's *Playboy* magazine (whose fictional content has never been equalled since he left to pursue a writing career in Hollywood) and the succession of first-class short stories published in a variety of magazines, culminating in the outstanding novelette, "Sardonicus," (reviewed here some months ago) and the outstanding film script of Poe's *The Premature Burial* (see No. 56) in collaboration with Charles Beaumont.

The Case Against Satan starts off prosaically enough, in the parish of a Roman Catholic priest, with a suspected case of

'possession' in a young 16-year-old girl who is unable to enter a church without being driven into an apparently schizophrenic frenzy. Set against this modern day and age, Mr. Russell skilfully draws a strong web of plausibility into his characters, the priest concerned eventually confers with his Bishop and they decide that exorcism is the only salvation for the girl's soul, rather than the psychiatrist's couch.

The battle with Satan becomes a tense *believable* drama, but at the same time, Mr. Russell begins to introduce other characters and tensions as some of the local parishioners begin to suspect that Black Mass is being performed in the rectory. Suddenly, from the small focal point of a few characters in a simple setting, the novel opens out to encompass the entire community and becomes a 'big book' in every sense. Suspense piles up in the tradition of a first-class thriller as irrelevant clues take on a sinister import, indeed, it is as much a thriller in its own right, for an apparent suicide turns into suspected murder and while the priests are battling with Diabolus, the police are trying to rationalise the events in terms of modern criminology.

Apart from the plot itself, Mr. Russell asks some pertinent religious questions, which, irrespective of one's personal creed, the reader will find difficult to answer, or, if he does, will come up with answers that will surprise himself.

A very powerful first novel, indeed. Not to be missed.

American—Paperback

Gather, Darkness ! by Fritz Leiber (Berkley, 50¢). The paperback edition of that fine 1943 *Astounding* serial dealing with the aftermath of the second atomic age, when the world has fallen into a new Dark Age and the main war is between priests and witches and angels and devils.

Ghosts And Things (Berkley, 50¢). A general collection of 11 stories featuring many of the old hardy perennials—Bierce, Machen, Blackwood, Saki, Maurois, and others. Not so interesting.

The Frankenstein Reader, edited by Calvin Beck (Ballantine, 50¢). On a par with the previously-mentioned title, except that here we have Wells, Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, and other early writers. I feel that there has been a great deal of good material written *since* 1920 and anthologists could do better by considering more modern material.

—John Carnell

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- 29 EARTH IS BUT A STAR—John Brunner
- 36 ECHO IN THE SKULL—John Brunner
- 37 CASTLE OF VENGEANCE—Kenneth Bulmer
- 38 ENCHANTER'S ENCOUNTER—E. C. Tubb
- 39 THE SOUND SWEEP—J. G. Ballard
- 40 STRANGE HIGHWAY—Kenneth Bulmer
- 41 THE GAUDY SHADOWS—John Brunner
- 43 BEYOND THE SILVER SKY—Kenneth Bulmer
- 44 THE BLACK CAT'S PAW—John Rackham
- 45 THE MAP COUNTRY—Kenneth Bulmer
- 46 NEED—Theodore Sturgeon
- 47 THE DREAMING CITY—Michael Moorcock
- 48 THE ANALYSTS—John Brunner
- 50 ANKH—John Rackham
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